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MRS. ROMNEY.

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BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY,

AUTHOR OF "NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS," "QUEENIE'S WHIM," "MARY ST. JOHN," ETC.

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LIPPINCOTT'S
MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

MAY, 1893.

MRS. ROMNEY.

CHAPTER I.

MISS VAUGHAN OF BANKSLAND.

"You are not like Cerberus, three gentlemen at once, are you?"
SHERIDAN.

MRS. ROMNEY again!

It was too provoking! The reiteration was almost offensive; it was becoming intolerable; it was really more than feminine flesh and blood could bear; it was like the scarifying sting of a small blood-thirsty insect, for it raised troublesome and invidious comparisons.

Elsie was not a patient person,—not one of those docile, tractable, lovable people whom it is a delight to train and discipline,—who can be drilled, exercised, and formed according to the teacher's whim and pleasure. She was as shy and wild as an unbroken colt accustomed to the sweet dews and breezes of an upland pasture and ignorant as yet of snaffle and curb and a future master; she was full of tricks and frolics, and not averse to small tempers, that were as brief and gusty as a storm in a teacup; and then, like most girls, she had such a good opinion of herself!

Her engagement was only four-and-twenty hours old, and she was already repenting it; at least—yes, she was almost sure that she repented it; she was out of humor with herself and Oliver; and Mrs. Romney —tiresome Mrs. Romney—was the stumbling-block, the *casus belli*, the apple of discord!

And yet what had Oliver said, after all? He had made two or three harmless remarks. In the first flush of his joy and triumph, when Elsie had yielded her perverse little self to his impassioned pleading, almost his first words had been, "Darling, how pleased Romney will be to hear this!" and then, as though by an after-thought, "and Mrs. Romney." And by and by, "You will like Mrs. Romney,

Elsie; every one likes my sister-in-law, she has such a big, grand nature. There is nothing little about her. I always tell Romney that he is a fortunate fellow to have such a wife."

Well, she had not minded this; she was glad to have such a favorable report of Oliver's sister-in-law; she was curious to hear all about her new connections; so she had questioned him a little closely and anxiously on the subject of Mrs. Romney's good looks; but here he had disappointed her; she could make nothing of his descriptions: no, certainly Oliver was not good at description.

"Is Mrs. Romney handsome?—I always call her Mrs. Romney: I like the name, somehow,—it pleases me better than Catherine. Well, no, not exactly,—no, certainly not," with greater decision of manner. "My taste leans more to brown hair with a ruddy gleam in it, and eyes that are as blue and soft as—well, what am I saying to make you look so shy, Elsie? Ah, we were talking about Mrs. Romney, were we? Well, if you must have it, she is not handsome; she is dark, and her features are irregular, but she has plenty of expression, and she looks uncommonly well in evening dress. She has magnificent arms and hands,—Thorold asked permission to model them for his Andromache,—and she is altogether a very graceful sort of person."

"And your brother fell in love with her?"

"Yes," with marked gravity, "Romney fell in love with her." Oliver had a tiresome habit of repeating his words, as though he delighted in them. "Men will do it, you know, and the disease is very catching. Why, even I, the most sedate and stoical of Her Majesty's officers, was not invulnerable to—to——" and here it must be owned that Mrs. Romney dropped rather suddenly out of the conversation; she fell as heavily as a plummet into a well, as Milton says, "The lazy leaden-stepping hours, whose speed is but the heavy plummet's pace;" in fact, she sank like a stone.

But the remark that had incensed Elsie, and that had brought that impatient and very improper exclamation to her lips, "Really, Captain Carfax, I am tired to death of Mrs. Romney before I have seen her!" was this:

"I do hope, dear, that you and Mrs. Romney will be good friends. Her being so many years older is all the better; for, having no mother or sister, you poor child, you must often want a word of advice; and Mrs. Romney is so sensible, and then she has so much more experience!" There was a speech to make to a spoiled heiress,—to Miss Vaughan of Banksland! but it only showed an absolute want of tact on Oliver's part. Certainly Captain Carfax should have known better. For it is a well-known psychological fact, and one that commends itself specially to the female mind, that if a person hitherto unknown be unduly or over-much eulogized and belauded, the auditor at once becomes conscious of secret antagonism and an intense desire to pick holes and find fault with such a piece of perfection, and to view him or her in a bad light. "The white light that beats" upon the throned and sceptred being brings out one's imperfections into stronger relief. If Mrs. Romney were, in her husband's and Oliver's eyes, this paragon of womanhood, this pink and acme of perfection, this chrysolite without

flaw or blemish, then she—Elsie Vaughan—would only seem a very weak, faulty little person, and it behooved her at once to take up sword and spear in her own defence.

The scene, the situation, the accessories of the picture, were simply perfect: an artist might have roved amid the whole thing and laid the foundation of his future success as a R.A., as he painted in the lights and shades of that simple, every-day, and yet wholly idyllic picture. Banksland stood high above the river; in the spring its sloping lawn looked as gay as a ball-room, with its huge horse-chestnut trees loaded with red and white blossoms, and commanded a bewitching view of deep-green meadows, where cranesbill and small yellow rock roses grew, with wild thyme and all manner of dainty herbage; while below, the silver trail of the river gleamed between the trees, with fairy-like sails dotted here and there among the greenery. The sunshine, the blue sky, the red roofs of the boat-houses, and the milky whiteness of geese waddling over the common, gave vivid coloring to the picture; while, in the foreground, the garden at Banksland, Elsie's roses, and her own charming little white-gowned self, her striking personality, and the quiet, languid-looking man stretched at her feet, made up the idyll.

Oliver Carfax was by no means a handsome man; in the opinion of his mother, Lady Carfax, all the beauty of the family had centred in the person of his brother Romney, who was indeed a prince among men, though he had an Englishman's unconsciousness of the fact. If Romney were proud of anything, it was of his keen eye and straight aim and his remarkably good taste in choosing a wife: for the rest, he had plenty of excellent muscle, kept himself in good condition, had a horror of growing stout and of missing a shot, and rather liked to be told that he had a good tailor; men, even the best of them, having their private weakness.

Oliver looked small and pale and a trifle insignificant beside his brother's splendid proportions and magnificent physique; but he had a way with him that people could not overlook. He was a soldier, and he looked the character to the life; and he had no nonsense about him, except a habit of half closing his eyes as though he had weak sight, and a slow, indifferent way of speaking when people were strange to him, that rather aggravated them, because they fancied he was bored and did not like them; and in nine cases out of ten they were right. On Elsie herself he had made a distinctly unfavorable impression. She had seen him for the first time at the Trentham ball: it was the evening of her greatest triumph, for more than one susceptible youth had fallen an easy prey to the young heiress's charm. "An orphan, no encumbrances, and a tidy little fortune of her own,—by Jove! it will just suit me down to the ground: and as for looks, there is not a girl in the place to hold a candle to her; plenty of go, too,—just my sort." These were the inward reflections of more than one young aspirant to Miss Vaughan's favor. Elsie was quite ready to do her part, to smile on them and answer their neat little speeches with the bright intelligence that seemed natural to her: she was outwardly gracious to all her partners, but she preferred the tall handsome ones;

and she was secretly chagrined to find that Captain Carfax had put down his name on her programme for three valses.

Certainly she must own, however, that he danced well, exceedingly well; he had a gliding smoothness of step that suited hers to a nicety; but a fair, pale man with half-closed eyes and a quiet drawl that appeared to her a little affected was not to her taste. He seemed half asleep, he was bored, he wanted waking up; she felt inclined to say something rude to him, something that would rouse him from his lethargy, that would make him open his eyes. and—but here Elsie grew suddenly hot, and unfurled her fan a little nervously, while she fixed her eyes on a spurred heel before her. She had had a shock; she was just going to open her lips, the first word of the flippant little speech was about to be spoken, when suddenly Captain Carfax's heavy lids had raised themselves of their own accord, and a glance so keen and searching, so full of life, had met hers, that she had become suddenly dumb and confused; and he was speaking, too, with the utmost animation and friendliness: "I knew we should get on awfully; your step just suits mine, Miss Vaughan: shall we have another turn? the last was perfect; if you are not tired,—thanks;" and she was whirled round the room again,—no, not whirled,—that word would hardly convey the smooth firm precision with which Captain Carfax guided her through the maze of dancers; it was the very poetry of motion. He did not say much to her,—Oliver was one who talked by fits and starts,—but somehow his silence was eloquent and pregnant with meaning; a sort of weight attached to his simplest sentences; when he said, later on, "You must have an ice," Elsie somehow felt that that frigid form of refreshment had become an imperative necessity to her. There was quite a crowd round the door when she made her appearance from the cloak-room; she had a bewildering blue hood trimmed with white fur that dazzled the young men's eyes; a blue hood ever after seemed to them the loveliest article of feminine attire that they had ever seen. "There is rather a deep step; let me assist you," and Captain Carfax was by her side; no one had seen him push his way to the front; yet a moment before he had been in the hall. Elsie could have declared that her fan had been in her hand when she left the cloak-room; it was one she greatly prized, for it had belonged to her mother; the loss took away all the pleasure of a successful evening, and she laid down her programme and her gloves on her toilet table with a sense that Solomon was right after all, and that all was vanity and vexation of spirit; and there was certainly a suspicion of moisture in her bright eyes as she arrived at this lugubrious conclusion. Her delight was unbounded, then, when the next afternoon, just as Morgan was setting the tea-table, Captain Carfax was announced, and she saw him entering her drawing-room with the fan in his hand; his moustache twitched a little as he heard her exclaim, "Oh, the dear thing! how good of you to bring it, Captain Carfax! Where did you find it? Did I drop it in the hall or on the steps, or did I leave it in the cloak-room?" Elsie remembered afterwards that none of these questions had been answered: the finding of the fan remained a mystery, until, months afterwards, Oliver informed her that he had quietly taken it out of

her hand as she was getting into the carriage. "I wanted a pretext for calling. It was rather a clever device, eh, Elsie?"

"No, sir, it was nothing of the kind!" she returned, indignantly; "it was an infamous robbery: you stole my fan; and I cried—I actually cried—over the loss."

"Oh, come, now, no exaggeration; exchange is no robbery,—I learned that in the nursery: if I stole your fan, you had stolen my heart already; it was love at first sight; when I wrote my name in your programme I knew it was all up with your humble servant."

Elsie never knew why she had accepted Captain Carfax, which she did quite meekly the moment he asked her; she told him afterwards rather crossly that he had given her no chance,—metaphorically, he had carried her off her feet.

"I did not in the least wish to be engaged," she remarked, thoughtfully, as he was about to bid her good-night that evening, and her tone was a little reproachful; the spoiled child had always been used to speak her mind on every occasion.

Oliver had risen, but he sat down again and caressed his moustache: it was not much of a moustache, being sandy in color and a trifle wiry. "No, I suppose not," he observed, after an interval of silence.

"You put too strong a pressure on me. I always told Uncle George"—Uncle George was Elsie's guardian and sole relative—"that I never intended to be engaged until I was three-and-twenty."

"Ah, we often make a false shot," he returned, cheerfully. "I once told Romney that I was cut out for an old bachelor, but he did not believe me: so we were both wrong, you see. You will find it awfully jolly, being engaged, when you once get used to it; I like it already." And with this he took his leave. Elsie made up her mind that she would send him a note the next morning releasing him from his engagement. "I promised too quickly," she thought of saying; "I should prefer to have my three years of freedom, after all;" but she somehow lacked courage to send the note; but, being an impulsive girl, she showed it to him when he came, just to see how he took it; but he only read it and screwed it up in his hand smiling, and went on with the conversation. He hoped Romney would ask him to take her down to the Frythe; he would have a month's leave of absence in June, and it would be capital sport driving her in Romney's dog-cart or riding with her about Fordham; and he drew such a pleasant description of the Frythe and Fordham that Elsie quite longed for the invitation, and the talk flowed on smoothly until Oliver's injudicious speech about Mrs. Romney awoke her smouldering ire.

"I am quite sure that I shall detest Mrs. Romney."

Elsie looked provokingly pretty as she made this speech; the sunshine was in her eyes, and she had contrived a screen with Oliver's hat, the truth being that he had offered it to her for the purpose. "My object in life is to get sunburnt," he assured her, solemnly, as she looked apologetically at his closely-cropped head: his hair looked almost bleached in the sunshine: a phrenologist, however, would have been profoundly satisfied with the shape and formation, the bumps of

concentrativeness, cautiousness, firmness, and benevolence being well developed.

Oliver had a pebble in his hand; the gravel path was behind him and offered him a store of small missiles; he had made up his mind to hit a knob of wood in a garden chair at some distance. When Elsie had uttered her fractious little speech, he took aim, and the pebble grazed the knob.

"Good," he observed, briefly, and his tone showed self-satisfaction; then he turned lightly on his side and took Elsie's hand.

"You are very young, dear," he said, in an amused tone, "but you will grow older and wiser every year. I rather admire your downright speeches, they are so thoroughly honest. Poor Mrs. Romney! well, I will not say any more about her just now; she shall plead her own cause."

Oliver was really behaving very generously, but he had only been engaged twenty-four hours, and he was far too happy to quarrel with his *fiancée;* he was more in love with Elsie than the girl knew or even guessed; she had not the faintest notion of the real nature of the man to whom she had plighted her troth,—of his depth of character, and his strong tenacity of purpose; his manner was misleading, his assumed languor hid him like a mask. Captain Carfax did not always choose to be understood: he had not yet willed to reveal himself to his young betrothed. But in spite of his generosity Elsie felt herself aggrieved. Miss Vaughan of Banksland was an important person. She did not want to be forgiven and patted on the head like a naughty little girl, so she said, severely, "You talk so much of Mrs. Romney, and so little of your mother. I am more anxious to see Lady Carfax. Miss Dalton told me that she is very handsome."

"She is a good-looking woman," he returned, quietly. "You know my father is an invalid, Elsie, and my mother devotes herself to him; that is why Romney lives at the Frythe, instead of having a house of his own, that he may be at hand to manage everything: the house is so big, and my mother wished it. She and my father have the east wing to themselves."

"I wonder Mrs. Romney likes such an arrangement," observed Elsie, a little disdainfully. If Oliver had asked her to live with his parents—well, she would have had but one answer to that.

"Mrs. Romney is one who never consults her own wishes," returned Oliver, gravely. "Romney said that it was his duty to consider his parents, and that he would like to live at the Frythe, so she said at once that she wished it too. Now, then, shall I take you for a row on the river?" but he seemed so sure of Elsie's consent that he jumped up from the grass and shook himself, as though to prepare for action. Elsie half thought of saying, "No," by way of testing her power, but she changed her mind, and arrayed herself instead in a smart boating-dress, and a sailor hat that suited her to perfection, and they spent the rest of the afternoon among the swans and sedges.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN CARFAX HAS HIS WAY.

MUR. We are men, my liege.
MAC. Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men.
Macbeth.

ONE lovely afternoon in June, when every winged creature great or small was doing its little best to swell creation's mighty symphony, its "Lieder ohne Worte," as some one has said, and all young things were gambolling on the earth out of mere wantonness and exuberance of life, Elsie Vaughan sat in the corner of a first-class compartment bemoaning her hard fate with silent bitterness and self-pity, and deriving an immense though morbid pleasure from the process.

Elsie was perusing her own feelings and prospects with the same concentration of industry with which Captain Carfax was seemingly studying his *Times*; but she was too engrossed with her own thoughts to notice sundry keen and amused glances levelled in her direction. When Elsie looked at Oliver, which she did occasionally, rather haughtily and with a touch of defiance, he was always engrossed in his leader, and presented a blank and expressionless visage. At such moments Oliver looked decidedly plain. Elsie considered herself the most miserable of girls, because she had been engaged three whole weeks, and had not yet made up her mind whether she liked or detested her bonds, and was now on her way to be interviewed by Oliver's relatives. Being a shy little mortal, in spite of her conceit, Elsie was in a state of nervous collapse,—the thought of Mrs. Romney being the sole irritant. She was more than ever determined that Mrs. Romney would be her *bête noire*, the wolf in sheep's clothing who would ruin all her pleasure at Fordham. Elsie had come to the conclusion that an engaged person resembled a bird with its wings clipped; her flights were curtailed and regulated by a masculine will: Miss Vaughan had at times a humiliating consciousness that she had found her master. Now and then she felt as though she almost hated this quiet smooth-tongued man who made her pretty speeches and told her that she was young. As Elsie was nineteen, she objected to be considered young; besides which, Oliver was only five-and-twenty,—which proved he was not a Methuselah,—and ought not to give himself airs. But on the whole she respected him, and her hatred must have been in embryo, as they had enjoyed a good deal of boating together during his brief visits to Banksland, and his letters had been eagerly read and answered with a great deal of painstaking care, the slightest erasure necessitating a clean copy. How tenderly Captain Carfax had laid aside these neat girlish epistles, with their faint fragrance of rose-leaves, their formal beginnings and small stilted sentences, and the rush of words at the end! Elsie's postscript resembled herself, and revealed her meaning with blunt honesty. When she told Oliver that she was not sure that she wanted to see him, that she was quite happy with Uncle George, but that he might come if he liked, she meant every word she said, and Oliver believed her, but he came all the same, and made himself so agreeable that she was sorry when he returned to

Aldershot. Elsie hardly knew how Oliver managed her, but she was conscious that she was managed: the idea fretted her at times and brought on one of her contradictory humors. On one or two occasions she had behaved very badly to her *fiancé*, but he had never seemed to notice it; once the snub had been publicly administered, and her chaperon, Mrs. Fielding, had given her a sharp reprimand; for she was a determined sort of person and had known Elsie's mother. "How could you treat Captain Carfax so rudely, Elsie? I was quite ashamed of you. You are far too old to sulk like a baby," she had said, so severely that Elsie had first quarrelled with her and had then burst into tears, and in the end had begged Oliver's pardon. Perhaps her worst punishment was the way Oliver received her apology.

"There is no need of this between you and me, darling," he had said, quietly. "I understand you better than you do yourself. But don't try it on at the Frythe, or my mother and Mrs. Romney will think you younger than you are." Self-command is learned later in life; it was in this way Oliver took his revenge. For a day and a half Elsie went about her own house like a whipped kitten, and Captain Carfax and Mrs. Fielding exchanged glances. Oliver knew that the object of his idolatry was only a child woman, and had not grown into her full stature of womanhood; but nothing could exceed his reverence. She was crude, airified, and full of whimseys, but then, as he told Mrs. Romney, her mother had died before Elsie was eight years old. "Mr. Brudenell—Uncle George, as she calls him—is an old bachelor, and does not understand girls; and Mrs. Fielding, good creature as she is and devoted to Elsie, is only a married old maid. Ask Romney what I mean by that, if you do not understand me." But Mrs. Romney thought that she understood Oliver's meaning very well, and put down his letter with a stifled sigh.

"Men of Oliver's calibre like to educate their wives, at least discipline them, before they marry them," she said later on to her husband as they discussed the letter, as they discussed most things, in Romney's smoking-room. "A full-fledged wife would not suit him at all. She is more a child than a woman; I can read that between the lines; but Oliver will love her all the better for the trouble she gives him. Oliver is a Carfax." And somehow the last few words were as soft as a caress.

"I always said you were the cleverest woman I ever knew, Catherine," returned her husband, admiringly. "You ought to have married Oliver, for as far as cleverness goes you two are a match: Oliver, confound the fellow's impudence, has more brains in his little finger than I have in my whole body." But, as usual when Romney made these humble speeches, his wife only looked at him with worshipping eyes: he was a king among men, and yet his Kitty, as he loved to call her, satisfied him.

Elsie's great fault in Captain Carfax's eyes was that she was an heiress; this was a serious blemish, and nearly prevented him from proposing to her; but he learned two or three proverbs by heart, such as "Gold is dross," "Manners makythe man," "Faint heart ne'er won fair lady," and a few others; and when he felt his pride was suffi-

ciently well nourished, and Elsie's filthy lucre had shrunk to its right proportions in the scale of the universe, he made tracks, as the people say, and his chariot-wheels ceased to drive heavily.

So much in life depends on one's own philosophy. If Diogenes had been thin-skinned, and had cared more for people's opinion than for his own stoicism, he would hardly have lived in a tub with contented equanimity: and even Simeon Stylites, unsupported by a supernatural love of asceticism and maceration, might have repented and bemoaned himself on his pillar. No one could long look dignified in the pillory, even before the rotten eggs appeared; dignity requires the use of the limbs, or at least the free carriage of the head. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus remarks somewhat pithily, "Constantly, and, if it be possible, on the occasion of every impression on the soul, apply to it the principles of Physic, of Ethic, and of Dialectic." This is vague, at least to the feminine understanding: he is better where he says, "No man will hinder thee from living according to the reason of thy own nature: nothing will happen to thee contrary to the reason of the universal nature."

Captain Carfax's bumps or rather organs of acquisitiveness and firmness being unusually prominent, nothing, humanly speaking, could hinder him from making love to the young heiress; and as Oliver generally succeeded when he gave his mind to a thing, Elsie's chances of escape were nil.

He was admiring her with all his heart at that moment. If she looked so pretty in the dumps, he was the luckiest fellow in the world; for of course every woman had her little tempers, and so long as she did not look ugly or sour, and the temper was not of the sullen or vindictive kind, he thought he could put up with it; but when Elsie's mouth drooped at the corners in that irresistible way, his stoicism, albeit of the Diogenes or Simeon Stylites sort, vanished in a moment. He was absurd, he was a fool, but he could not bear the child to look unhappy, and so—and so—but any lover over age could predict exactly how Oliver would act, and what he would say.

"Do you feel better now, darling,—just a tiny bit happier?"

"Yes—oh! I don't know," and then, clasping her little gray-gloved hands, which had somehow got mixed up with Oliver's, she continued rather hysterically, "but I have been so dreadfully unhappy,—and you did not care."

"How do you know? Were you looking at me?" Oliver put this atrocious question quite calmly, but Elsie flamed up in a moment:

"No, of course not. Why should I look at you, when you have made me so miserable? I never wanted to come to Fordham; you ought not to have asked me to do such a thing; no girl ought to be put in such a position; and I have been crying. What will Mrs. Romney think of me? Oh, if I were only safe with Uncle George and Aunt Minnie!"—this being Mrs. Fielding's *sobriquet;* and here Elsie dabbed her face with a small modicum of French cambric that she called a handkerchief.

"You poor little tired child," was Oliver's caressing answer, "don't be afraid of Mrs. Romney: she will be very good to you, every one

will be good to you, first for my sake and then for your own. Why," continued Oliver, keeping the *bonne bouche* for the last, "they will fall in love with you the moment they see you; no one could help it," finished the artful young man, as Elsie bridled and a little rose-leaf flush came into her pale cheeks.

"Oh, do you think so?" she gasped, but she never completed her sentence, for, with Oliver still holding her hand as though he had a right to do it, the train suddenly slackened, and a voice that sounded wonderfully familiar said, "Here they are, Kitty, first-class too, and I have won my bet," and the handsomest man she had ever seen in her life was waving a straw hat with a white ribbon around it.

Oliver took it very coolly: he never even dropped Elsie's hand, but the motion of his elbow gave him the appearance of helping her to rise.

"Actually Romney has put in an appearance! How are you, old man? Pretty fit? That's right.—Elsie, this is my big brother, who used to bully me when I was a small boy: people take us for twins now." But here Oliver found himself unceremoniously pushed out of the way.

"Don't listen to him, Miss Vaughan; he was always a precocious little beggar, and told no end of fibs. Well, I am delighted to see you. Where is that wife of mine? Catherine! Kitty! What has happened to the woman? she seems in a fix."

Mrs. Romney was certainly in a fix: she had been following her husband, pressing towards the railway-carriage, when she became entangled with a lady, a boy, and a dog: the lady was leading the dog, a small unhappy-looking pug, and the chain had caught Mrs. Romney's jacket-button; the boy, who was carrying cakes and butter-scotch, collided with them both, and the cakes strewed the platform. Mrs. Romney, who had a kind heart, and was touched by the lad's piteous dismay, had stopped to make herself useful, and all but one piece of butter-scotch had been replaced on the tray. Then she gathered herself up, smiling, and kissed Elsie before every one.

"How nice of you to come! Oliver was a good boy to bring you. We are all going to spoil you dreadfully.—Romney, I can hear Jess is fidgeting. Has Scott collected the luggage?—Oliver, please put Elsie into the wagonette; Romney is going to drive. I must just see if my cake-boy is quite happy in his mind."

"Awfully stiff and conventional, isn't she?" whispered Oliver, as he helped Elsie into the wagonette, and then he went in search of his sister-in-law. The Squire had gathered up the reins, and was looking complacently at the broad brown backs of the handsome pair of horses before him, then he flecked a fly off Jess's left ear. Elsie was too shy to address him; she had never seen such a magnificent man in her life: she was relieved when she saw Oliver and Mrs. Romney hurrying up to them. Mrs. Romney was flushed and out of breath.

"So sorry to keep you waiting, dear, but accidents will happen. A child fell down, and we had to pick her up and console her with some chocolate: such a dear little mite!—Are you quite comfortable in that corner, Elsie? You see I do not mean to be formal. Don't

trouble to talk if you're too tired; I hate people to talk to me when I am tired; and I have a hundred things to say to Oliver: we are tremendous cronies, he and I." And Mrs. Romney beamed on her brother-in-law.

Elsie was thankful to be left in peace for a few moments: her ideas wanted readjusting. This was not the Mrs. Romney she had been picturing to herself, the "graceful sort of person" who was Oliver's paragon, this talkative young woman in an old gray dust-cloak and an unbecoming hat, a hat that quite hid the smooth dark hair and broad forehead. Certainly Mrs. Romney was not handsome, not even pretty; one could almost call her plain. She had a frank mouth and a pleasant voice, but she talked so dreadfully fast and seemed to manage everybody. How could such a handsome man fall in love with such a plain woman? Then she remembered the arms and hands that had been modelled for Andromache, and felt that her criticism was a little premature; no one could look well in an old gray dust-cloak.

"Is this Fordham?" she asked, by way of making herself agreeable. Oliver would like to hear her talk: she must summon up courage and introduce a subject.

Mrs. Romney was ready with her answer in a moment: "Good gracious, no, child: Fordham is a village. This is Draycott, our county town. We have a railway-station, but there are so few suitable trains that my husband thought it would be better to drive from Draycott. Are you fond of the country, Elsie? Can you make yourself happy in a small quiet place? there will be little to amuse you, I fear. At Dene you had the river and boating. Ah, I know Dene well, and it is near London. Fordham will seem quite dead-and-alive after Dene."

"Oh, no, I love the country," returned Elsie, eagerly; but just then, just as she was getting into the swing of conversation, when the ice was beginning to break between her and the formidable Mrs. Romney, the Squire's voice was heard peremptorily ordering Kitty to look sharp and be ready to bow to the Ferards, and a barouche full of smiling nodding young women passed them, and four pairs of inquisitive eyes looked full at Elsie.

"Some neighbors of ours, who live at Castlebank. Romney is devoted to Laura Ferard: aren't you, Romney? What am I to look at next, dear?" for the Squire was signalling vigorously while he gave Jess a cut with the whip for her bad behavior in shying at a tinker's brazier. "Oh, I understand.—Elsie, do you see this gentleman who is following us in the dog-cart and who is trying to overtake us if Romney will let him? This is our next neighbor, Mr. Lockhart: he lives in a pretty little cottage called 'The Hut.'"

"Rab Lockhart is a character," put in Oliver. "Shall we enlighten her, Mrs. Romney, or shall we allow her to find out Rab for herself? Halloo! Black Madge has bolted. Rab means mischief. Hold hard, Romney, old fellow: don't let the browns get excited, or we shall all land in the ditch." And, thus admonished, the Squire reined in his horses.

"I always said Black Madge had the devil in her," shouted Mr.

Lockhart in rather a shrill voice as the dog-cart came alongside the wagonette. "The top of the morning to you, Squire; your humble servant, Mrs. Romney; ah, my friend the Captain—and——" here the triumphant Jehu ceased waving his white hat, and stared hard at Elsie. Mrs. Romney and Oliver exchanged looks, but neither spoke. A close observer would have suggested that both were bent on mischief. The Squire frowned, and drove on in rather a testy manner. Mr. Lockhart, who seemed waiting for an introduction, jerked his reins as a hint to Black Madge, and continued staring.

Elsie felt inclined to laugh, he was such a droll-looking little man; his bald head as he raised his hat was as bare as an ivory ball, save for the fringe of tow-colored hair which with a small stubbly moustache was his only hirsute ornament. He was small of stature, and his face was as round and chubby as a boy's, and had a shining polished look as though soap as well as water were freely used. His gray overcoat, white waistcoat, and large hothouse flower proved that Mr. Lockhart took care of his outer man. Elsie began to feel the persistent gaze of his prominent light blue eyes somewhat oppressive; she drew herself up and made a remark to Oliver.

"How far have we to go?" she asked, but, to her annoyance, Mr. Lockhart answered her:

"How far, Miss—humph, I beg your pardon, but I did not catch your name," meaningly,—a dead silence on Oliver's and Mrs. Romney's part; then, in a baffled and humble manner, "We are only a mile from Fordham; we have just passed the last milestone. We shall be in the Frythe in another quarter of an hour, Miss—humph-humph."

CHAPTER III.

AN ORDEAL.

> Yet do I fear thy nature:
> It is too full of the milk of human kindness.
> *Macbeth.*

"My name——" began Elsie, haughtily, but just at that moment Mrs. Romney begged her in an excited manner to look behind her at the funny little litter of black pigs in an orchard they were passing. "Do look at them; they cannot be more than three days old. Did you ever see such darling black infants?"

"I am thinking of buying one of them," observed Mr. Lockhart. "Do you like roast sucking-pig, Mrs. Romney?" And as that lady made a gesture of disgust, he continued in a persuasive manner to Elsie, "I have no pig-sty at The Hut; it is a great mistake; but I am intending to build one. Perhaps, Miss—humph-humph—when you and Mrs. Romney do me the honor of a little visit you will allow me to point out the site—— Eh, what, Squire?"

"You might have invited me, Rab," returned the Squire, quite restored to good humor, and entering into the joke. "I never allow Mrs. Romney to go anywhere without me, for fear of her getting into

mischief. You are not a safe man, Rab: a gay young spark and lady-killer like you—no, no; I could not trust Mrs. Romney."

The little man looked delighted at this chaff; he rubbed his hands together, bringing his whip into such smart collision with his face that the lash stung him. "You are jesting, Squire. It is just the Squire's fun, isn't it, captain? Not trust Mrs. Romney! Ha ha! We know better, don't we, madam? How about that meeting over at Draycott at eight o'clock on Thursday evening?"

"How about the inventions of you gentlemen?" returned Mrs. Romney, with a light laugh. "Romney, dear, please do not let the horses go to sleep. Whitefoot is so dreadfully lazy. You must tell Scott to dock his oats: he is growing fat."

"Fat!" returned the Squire, irritably, for this was touching him on a sore place. "What on earth do you mean, Catherine? Whitefoot is in splendid condition. Look at his glossy coat; and as for the pace,—why, that mare of Lockhart's is all in a fret and a foam with keeping up with us. But there is no pleasing you women."

"No, dear, we are troublesome creatures," continued Mrs. Romney, gently; then she stood up in the wagonette, and, steadying herself by laying a hand on her husband's shoulder, whispered something to him that must have been conciliatory, to judge from his pleased expression.

"None of your blarney, Kitty," they heard him say, and then Mrs. Romney laughed and sat down again, but Elsie thought she looked suddenly very tired.

The dog-cart had dropped behind a moment, as a cart was approaching them, and Elsie, relieved from the admiring gaze of the prominent blue eyes, began to take note of her surroundings. They had just passed a beautiful church and churchyard, and were driving through a trim, bright-looking village. Elsie had a rapid impression of cream-colored cottages with gardens full of roses and tall blue delphiniums and masses of gray and mauve campanulas; the air was perfumed with honeysuckles and roses, and as they passed the school-house a small round-faced child in a big white sun-bonnet toddled after the wagonette with a large nosegay of honeysuckles and dark-red clover in her hand.

"For dear ma'ams," she gasped, and would have been under the hoofs of Black Madge the next moment, had not Oliver leaned over the wagonette and dexterously hitched up the little one by her petticoats. No one could tell how he did it. Mrs. Romney bit her lips to keep in a shriek, and watched him with paling face, while Black Madge snorted and reared; and then Oliver, breathing hard, sat down again, with the child in his arms. The Squire had stopped his horses at Elsie's exclamation, and was waiting for an explanation, but no one gave it to him. Mrs. Romney was on her knees, kissing the child, and crying over the flowers, and Oliver sat languidly fanning himself. Elsie, in spite of her dislike to public demonstration, caught his hand in passing, and gave it a little squeeze.

"Oh, Oliver, how splendid!"

"Wasn't it, Miss—humph-humph!" exclaimed Mr. Lockhart, with a chuckle. "Never saw such a thing in my life. The captain

might have spent his life in picking up children; quite a practised hand, so cool and collected. Gave you a bit of strain, though." But Oliver shook his head; he was pushing back little Jenny's sun-bonnet to see her curls, a liberty which Jenny, true to her sex, resented. "Don't want gentlemans. I dot the f'owers for dear ma'ams;" but she ceased struggling, and nestled contentedly up to Mrs. Romney.

"Scene number three," observed the Squire, phlegmatically, when Jenny was safely delivered into her mother's keeping. "I never saw a woman with such a taste for brats as Kitty has. I have seen her kiss even the dirty ones," he continued confidentially to no one in particular.

They had gone through the length and breadth of Fordham, and were just passing a little stream bordered by hart's-tongue ferns and large ox-eyed daisies, when a substantial red brick house with a high-walled garden, and an old clock in the middle of the building, came in view; a groom was at the gate watching for them, and the next minute they were driving up a broad gravel sweep to the entrance.

"Welcome to Frythe, Miss Vaughan," exclaimed the Squire as he threw down the reins, but his wife said, softly, "You must call her Elsie, Romney, and then she will feel herself at home," and Oliver remarked under his breath, "Hear, hear."

"We shall find Gran and Sir Henry in the drawing-room," observed Mrs. Romney as she led the way through the wide, handsome hall, with its high carved mantel-piece and oak settles, down a corridor full of flowering plants.

"Gran generally has tea in the east wing," observed Mrs. Romney, "but she said that they must be in the drawing-room to welcome you this afternoon. You know, of course, that poor Sir Henry is a sad invalid?"

"Oliver told me so," returned Elsie, with a relapse into shyness. She wanted to stop and look out of the window; some peacocks were sunning themselves on the terrace among the roses; a smooth green lawn led to the edge of a small lake, with a delightful clump of trees underneath which some rare water-fowl were disporting themselves: it all looked so peaceful and beautiful. But Mrs. Romney put her hand through the girl's arm and hurried her on.

"We had better get the introductions over," she said, with a smile. "Gran is a little formidable until you get used to her, but she is a dear woman, and one soon gets accustomed to her dignified ways."

As Mrs. Romney spoke, they entered a sunny little anteroom with an arched door-way leading into the drawing-room.

Elsie thought it a charming room, it was full of such delightful nooks and corners. One deep bay-window had a circular cushioned seat, and another was furnished with a low tea-table and cosey-looking chairs. A stately-looking woman with fine aristocratic features and gray curls piled on her forehead after the prevailing fashion was sitting knitting beside her husband's invalid-chair. Sir Henry was a thin, nervous-looking man, many years older than his wife: in his youth he had been handsome, and even now, in his moments of comparative ease from the painful complaint that was slowly bringing him to the

grave, he showed himself a polished and cultured gentleman, though the record of suffering was plainly stamped on his wan face, and there was latent irritability in his pale-blue eyes.

In her earlier days Lady Carfax had been a brilliant and worldly woman, but her husband's affliction had subdued her, and for some years she had simply devoted herself to him.

She rose a little formally to receive her son's *fiancée*, but before Oliver, who was following them, could speak, Mrs. Romney's frank, cheerful voice was again heard:

"Here we are, Gran, punctual to a moment; and you must be very kind to this poor child, for she is tired out with all the strangeness."

"I hope that Oliver's belongings will not long be strange to you, my dear," returned Lady Carfax, kissing her with calm sedateness, and then Sir Henry held out a cold, shaking hand.

"We are very pleased to see you," he said, with old-fashioned courtesy. "We are quiet people for young folk. I am a sad invalid, as you see, but Lady Carfax takes great care of me.—Oliver, my boy, will you just wheel me out of the sun?—Sit down, young lady, and make yourself comfortable. Catherine will look after you; she likes looking after people."

"Yes, dear Sir Henry, so I do." And Mrs. Romney passed her hand caressingly over the wrinkled forehead as she passed his chair. "Now, Gran, I am going to give you some tea.—Elsie, take this little chair beside me, and Oliver will wait on you." And as Elsie gratefully slid into the little sheltered nook assigned her, she almost envied Mrs. Romney her power of putting people at their ease.

"How does she do it?" thought Elsie, when ten minutes had elapsed and she found herself listening to an animated discussion between Mrs. Romney and her mother-in-law on some purchases she had made that afternoon. She was even inveigled into giving her opinion on the merits of art serges, though she was a little frightened when she discovered that Lady Carfax differed from her. "I am too old-fashioned to share your modern taste, my dear," she said, with a sort of gentle contempt in her voice. "Catherine is always telling me how old-fashioned I am: are you not, my love?"

"Yes, Gran, and you take all my rude speeches with the patience of an angel.—Elsie, this mother-in-law of mine has the sweetest temper in the world; but you will soon find this out for yourself.—Does any one know what Romney is doing with himself?—Ah, there you are, my lord and master," as the Squire entered, and Sir Henry's face brightened perceptibly.

"How are you, father?" he asked, as he took his cup of tea from his wife's hand. "We don't often see you on this side of the house; but I suppose it is in Miss Vaughan's honor.—Ah! I see Kitty has taken you under her wing, Miss Vaughan; she always does that sort of thing.—Do you remember, mother, when I introduced Kitty to you, under the same sort of circumstances? it was three years ago, eh, Kitty?" And a blush came to Mrs. Romney's cheek.

"Only three years? It seems longer," she said, dreamily.

"You are paying my son a poor compliment, Catherine," returned

Lady Carfax, with a smile; "but we understand her: do we not, Romney?" And the Squire laughed.

"Kitty is very Irish at times, but I have learned to translate her speeches." And Mrs. Romney, who had seemed a little abstracted, roused herself at her husband's speech.

"I only meant that three years seemed too short to hold so much happiness," she said, with a simplicity that seemed natural to her. "Gran, if you will excuse me, I should like to take Elsie to her room.—Come with me, dear." And, as they left the room together, she said, confidentially,—

"I was so sorry for you, you poor child, you looked so frightened when Gran kissed you. Gran is very imposing, and she makes one feel rather small at times; but you will soon get fond of her. You did not like me at first, did you? but you will find me a very comfortable sort of person." And, after this frank speech, Mrs. Romney pointed out to her the various arrangements for her comfort in the spacious, well-furnished room assigned for her use, and then, commending her to the care of a pleasant-looking young woman who was to act as her maid, Mrs. Romney departed, promising to return presently.

Elsie dressed herself quickly, and then, ignoring Mrs. Romney's request that she would remain quietly in her room and rest until she fetched her, she opened her door, and walked quietly down the corridor. A window-recess at the far end attracted her, but as she passed a half-open door Mrs. Romney's voice called to her: "Is that you, Elsie? Will you come and see my boy?" And as Elsie entered the nursery she heard the little ripple of baby laughter.

For a moment she felt bewildered. Could the voluble lady in the gray dust-cloak be transformed into this graceful-looking woman in black, who was standing in the middle of the room, with the fair-haired blue-eyed child in her arms?

Elsie glanced at her doubtfully, at the white unadorned neck that looked so dazzlingly fair, and at the beautifully-shaped head with its smooth coils of dark hair; and she felt Oliver's description had been correct: Mrs. Romney, in spite of her lack of beauty, was certainly an attractive woman.

"Is not Harry a darling?" she exclaimed, as Elsie kissed the child. "He is exactly like Romney; every one says so; he does not take after his mother at all. How pretty you look, Elsie! You ought always to wear white. I dare say Oliver has told you that, he has such taste. Romney never knows what dress I have on, but Oliver always notices one's clothes: if he takes a dislike to a thing, he never lets you have a moment's peace."

"May I have your boy a moment?" pleaded Elsie; but Harry hid his face on his mother's shoulder, and refused to make friends with Aunt Elsie, in spite of all entreaties.

"But you must not call me that," observed Elsie, in rather a distressed tone. "Suppose Oliver were to hear you."

"Nonsense!" returned Mrs. Romney, vigorously; "my baby boy must be taught to love his aunt. What a delicious child you are, Elsie! you answer exactly to Oliver's description; you have not disappointed

me at all. I am quite fond of you already, and yet you do not care for me a bit; but I shall make you like me; if I try, I can always make people care for me. Oliver says I am a regular witch."

"Oliver is always talking about you. He praises you to the skies." Elsie's tone was slightly dubious. Mrs. Romney, who was rocking her boy gently, gave her a quick comprehending glance.

"I shall tell Oliver that he is a goose. Of course you were prejudiced against me; but you must try and forget all his nonsense and take me on my own merits. I have not been disagreeable to you yet, have I?"

"No, indeed; you have been very kind," returned Elsie, in a conscience-stricken tone; she was sensible all at once of a curious revulsion of feeling; she was not quite so sure that she disliked Mrs. Romney. To get rid of her embarrassment she added, hastily, "I am afraid that I shall never feel at my ease with Lady Carfax."

"Oh, yes, you will," returned Mrs. Romney, with one of the sudden brilliant smiles that seemed to light up her face. "Let me tell you something. Three years ago I went through the same terrible ordeal. I did not see Gran until Romney and I were married," and, as Elsie looked rather surprised at this, she continued, a little hurriedly, "I will tell you all about that some day. My husband's people were not pleased with his choice, and Romney refused to take me to the Frythe until he could introduce me as his wife. You see, Elsie," with a sudden proud curl of her lip, "I was not an heiress like you, and both Sir Henry and Lady Carfax thought that Romney had done very badly for himself in marrying me."

"How dreadful it must have been for you!"

"Well, it was pretty bad. I shall never forget Romney's face as he stood there while Gran made her stiff conventional little speeches: 'Mrs. Romney must be tired; had we suffered from the dust? would I go to my room and rest?' and all the time there was such a lump in my throat that I could scarcely answer."

"And Mr. Romney did not help you?"

"No, dear; he was only vexed with me for my awkwardness; he was so uncomfortable himself, poor fellow, that it made him quite cross. At last I could bear it no longer; I wanted to burst out crying, or run out of the room, but I burst out laughing instead. Oh, how horrified Romney looked! But I think I should have died if I had not laughed, and I said, 'Please, please, do not look at me as though you hated me, for I mean to love you with all my heart, because you are Romney's mother,' and I threw my arms round her, and kissed her as though she had been my own darling mother, and—would you believe it, Elsie?—the dear old thing actually cried, and said that she did not mean to be unkind, and Romney got sweet-tempered in a moment, and petted us and said nice things to us both, and Gran and I sat hand in hand for the rest of the evening: what do you think of that, Elsie? Ah, there is the gong, and I can hear Oliver running up three steps at a time to fetch his lady-love."

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST EVENING AT THE FRYTHE.

Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short.
Richard II.

SIR HENRY always took his meals in his own room, and Lady Carfax, who had long ago resigned her place to her daughter-in-law, sat at her son's right hand, while Elsie found herself seated between Mrs. Romney and Oliver.

"I told Romney that we would not stand on ceremony," observed his wife, in a whisper, which was overheard by the Squire's sharp ears, for he remarked, in a discontented tone, as he unfolded his napkin,—

"I wish I had asked Rab to dine with us this evening. It is too bad of you to desert me in this way, Miss Vaughan, and take up with my wife. You will find that Kitty rules us all; even Oliver is under her thumb: so I advise you to look out; you will have no will of your own as long as you are at the Frythe."

"I warn you to take no notice of my son's speech," observed Lady Carfax, in her soft precise manner; "he teases Catherine dreadfully, but you will soon find out for yourself that he can do nothing without her." And she looked affectionately at her daughter-in-law. "We did not want Mr. Lockhart here this evening, did we, Catherine?"

"No, indeed," with energy. "Elsie, I hope you are aware that you have made a conquest: at the risk of making Oliver jealous, I must inform you that poor Rab has lost his heart at first sight."

Elsie looked so mystified at this that there was a general laugh at her expense; but no one enlightened her, until she and Mrs. Romney were taking a turn on the lawn while the gentlemen lighted their cigarettes in the porch, when Mrs. Romney explained the joke:

"I was quite serious when I said poor Rab had lost his heart, Elsie. Rab is a very eccentric character; he is a droll, harmless little man, and we are all very fond of him, for he is the best-natured fellow in the world; but he has a mania for falling in love: to my knowledge he has proposed to three of our guests and has been invariably refused."

"How can he be so absurd?"

"Absurd! there is something pathetic to me in Rab's persevering endeavors to get married. He has a pretty little house, and a good income, and the kindest of natures; but he is so droll-looking, such a bald-headed boy, as Oliver calls him, that no one will have anything to say to him, though I have told Romney over and over again that Rab would make the best husband in the world."

"I thought him very rude to stare at me so," returned Elsie. "Why did you refuse to take his hints? He wanted to find out my name."

"Of course he did, but Oliver and I were bent on playing him a trick. He makes love to all our young lady guests, but he would not venture on such a liberty with Oliver's *fiancée*. Was it not delicious to hear his Miss Humph-humph! Poor Rab, how his face will fall when he hears your name! He wants your advice on the subject of pig-sties, does he not, Elsie?"

"Mr. Lockhart must be very dense not to have understood that you were all laughing at him."

"I don't believe Rab is dense at all. He is quite aware of his own comicality. He makes me his confidante sometimes. He once told me, in a lamentable voice, that he wished he did not look so much like a chubby boy. I could hardly keep my countenance. Grace Carfax, a cousin of my husband, had just refused him most indignantly, and Rab's feelings had been wounded. 'She need not have spurned me as though I were a worm and no man,' he observed, with tears in his eyes."

"I can understand Miss Carfax's indignation," was Elsie's unfeeling observation on this.

"Oh, but I am tender-hearted, and I am sorry for poor little chubby-faced Rab. I will tell you a profound secret, only please do not betray me to my husband or Oliver, or they would circumvent my plan out of sheer malice. I am so sorry for Rab that I am determined to find him a wife, and I think I have some one in my mind who would exactly suit him. There, I will tell you another time, for here come the gentlemen. Elsie, do you mind talking to my husband while I take Oliver away? I have something I want to say to him." Mrs. Romney's manner changed, and she looked so beseechingly at the girl that Elsie could only assent to this.

It was evident that the Squire had no objection to this arrangement. When Elsie begged him to go on smoking he beamed on her, and observed that Oliver was a lucky fellow; and then he proposed a turn round the lake. Elsie chatted to him happily; she was glad that Oliver's brother was such a big, handsome man; he looked so strong, so genial, so thoroughly the contented Englishman, and he had such a happy faith in himself and his own belongings, no wonder his wife adored him.

He began talking about her presently. Belief in the perfections of his Kitty was evidently part of the Squire's creed; her opinions, her cleverness, her management of the boy, were all touched on with enthusiasm.

"My mother thinks that there is no one like her," he observed, presently, "and Oliver agrees with her. By the by, what has become of my wife and Oliver? I caught sight of Kitty's gown between the trees a short time ago. It is getting damp, Miss Vaughan. I propose that we go in."

Elsie agreed to this; her shoes were thin, and the grass was very wet, and the shrubbery paths were dark and damp, and she was growing tired; the Squire's pleasant easy flow of conversation ceased to interest her; she wanted to talk to Oliver; she began to feel it strange that he should desert her on this first evening for Mrs. Romney; she had a hundred questions to ask him; for his sake she had been exerting herself and trying to overcome her natural timidity; she longed for a word of commendation and assurance that he was pleased with her, and he was strolling about with Mrs. Romney and taking no notice of her at all. Elsie began to feel a little hurt and resentful. The Squire unwittingly fanned the flame:

"Upon my word, Miss Vaughan,—excuse me, I should have said Elsie,—you ought to keep Oliver in better order. He and Kitty will have to give up their moonlight prowls, now he has a young lady to look after; that wife of mine spoils him dreadfully."

The Squire made this jesting speech without any malice; he secretly delighted in the fact that his wife and his only brother were such great friends; but Elsie's discontent verged on positive discomfort.

It was too bad. She was just beginning to like Mrs. Romney, at least not to dislike her, but if she had the bad taste to monopolize Oliver and to carry him off for hours on her first evening at the Frythe (a bare hour was the limit of Mrs. Romney's audacity), she should certainly disapprove of her. Why, actually the Squire had got tired of entertaining her, and had gone in quest of his paper and a reading-lamp. Lady Carfax had retired to the east wing; and here she was actually left to herself in a strange house. And Elsie's margin of discontent broke boundaries and overflowed into positive resentment. Elsie was unaware that at that moment two dark forms were ascending the grassy slope that led to the terrace, and that they checked their footsteps involuntarily at the sight of the little white figure sitting so disconsolately under the mellow light of the big standard lamp.

"What a pretty picture, Oliver! Is it not a lovely little face? But she looks dull, poor child. Go in and talk to her while I make myself presentable. What a goose I was to cry! If Romney asks for me, tell him I have gone to see Harry."

"Ah, what? are those the truants? Upon my word, Kitty, you are a cool hand! I wonder what Miss Vaughan thinks of your monopoly of Oliver?" And the Squire, with his paper in his hand, suddenly blocked up the window.

"Is that not Harry crying?—please excuse me, dear; I will come back directly," and Mrs. Romney vanished, but not before Elsie's keen girlish eyes had detected that Mrs. Romney's face was flushed and tear-stained and that Oliver's countenance had a grave abstracted expression. Elsie was conscious of sudden irritation; her little white throat swelled for a moment, as though something choked her. "It is very late," she said, hurriedly, "and I am so tired: may I go to bed, please?"

"Of course you are tired," returned the Squire, kindly. "Kitty is not often forgetful of her guests' comfort. She ought to have taken you off with her."

"I will light your candle, Elsie." Oliver spoke with unusual abruptness: he opened the door for her somewhat gravely, but as soon as they were alone together in the dimly-lighted hall his manner changed.

"Are you very angry with me, darling?" he said, trying to detain her, but she broke away from him, and walked a little haughtily to the window, and after a moment's hesitation he followed her.

"I see you are offended with me, Elsie," he said, quietly, "but indeed I could not help myself. Mrs. Romney wanted me to assist her in a little difficulty, but we had no idea that you had been left so long alone. I was quite shocked when I heard the stable clock just now."

"Don't trouble to apologize to me," returned Elsie, coldly: "your

brother was very pleasant and entertaining, and I was very well amused." But Oliver caught her hands, with sudden irritation.

"For heaven's sake, don't take that tone with me, Elsie. Don't you see I am worried enough without that?" Oliver spoke with unusual excitement. Elsie had never seen him so moved before. What had she said? How had she hurt him? Were they quarrelling this first evening? She glanced at him a little timidly.

"It is not my fault that you have been left to yourself so long," he continued, "and you must not blame Mrs. Romney, either. Do you think I ever wish to leave you?" his voice breaking into tenderness. "Elsie, you are all the world to me, but I think you might trust me a little."

"Trust you! Of course I trust you, Oliver. What can you mean?"

"I hardly know what I do mean, darling. Something has put me out this evening, and I am not quite myself. If you knew how I was longing to talk to you! Elsie, promise me never to be offended with me again for such a little thing."

Was it such a little thing? Elsie's conscience pricked her. Oliver had always laughed at her little tempers before; he had never taken them seriously; he looked tired and worried, and—well, after all, Elsie's heart was in the right place, and there was healing enough in that shy kiss, the first she had ever offered him, for any wound, however deep.

So the treaty of peace was signed, and though Oliver's gratitude for favors received was somewhat overwhelming, and he would not allow her to leave him, Elsie felt happier than she had done since she arrived at the Frythe, and she was hardly damped when Oliver told her that he would have to leave her for a few hours the next day.

"It is a great bore," he observed, discontentedly, "for I wanted to take you for a ride; but we will make up for it in the evening."

"Must the business be done, Oliver?"

"I fear it must, dear, as I am taking the dog-cart into Draycott. Mrs. Romney proposes to accompany me, as she has some shopping to do in the town; but I shall ask my mother to drive you somewhere."

Elsie was just going to say, "Could I not go in the dog-cart too?" but she checked herself, for of course Oliver would take the groom. She was sadly disappointed, however; a ride with Oliver would be so delicious, and a drive with Lady Carfax seemed a very formidable sort of function; but she would not worry him by hinting at this. And she had her reward, for Oliver, who could read her thoughts pretty plainly, was giving her well-deserved praise; she was a dear, unselfish child, and he was ever so much obliged to her for falling in with his plans, and after this he consented to light her candle. Elsie had just taken it from him, and had wished him good-night, when the half-open door of the nursery attracted her notice, and when Oliver had left her she put down her candle and peeped in.

Mrs. Romney, still in her evening dress, was in her low rocking-chair, by the window. Her boy was lying half asleep on her lap, while she crooned a soft little lullaby over him, and one bare dimpled arm

was flung round his mother's neck. As Elsie's footsteps lingered by the door, he joined drowsily in the lullaby.

"Hush, my precious: Harry must go to sleep." Then, as she saw the girl standing beside her, she continued, "Is not Harry a naughty boy, to make poor mother take him out of his cot and sing him to sleep?"

"What a darling he is!" returned Elsie, kneeling down beside him. "How you must love him!" But as she made this very natural speech, Mrs. Romney shivered and sighed.

"I tell Romney that I love him too much. Do you know what it is to love so intensely, Elsie, that the feeling almost amounts to pain? Sometimes when I think of my two blessings I am almost afraid of my own happiness. I wonder whether you will ever feel like that with Oliver?"

"I don't know. I fear not."

"You are so very young, dear," returned Mrs. Romney, gently, and with a sudden impulse she put her arm round the girl and drew the brown head to her shoulder, "such a young motherless creature. Thank God that you have got Oliver to take care of you; never be afraid of trusting him, Elsie: he is so true, so strong, and so brave, that no woman need fear to confide her happiness to his keeping. The more you know him, the more you will love him; with the exception of my Romney, I do not know a man to compare with him."

"I know he is good," returned Elsie, softly. Her cheeks glowed at hearing these praises of her lover; she was glad that she had been nice to him this evening.

"Yes, he is good with a man's goodness; that is a very different sort of goodness from ours; we are so weak, even the best of us; we act on impulse and make mistakes." She checked herself and sighed again. "Elsie, take my advice, never be afraid of Oliver; tell him everything, everything; you will never have cause to repent your confidence. Now I am going to lay Harry in his cot. He is fast asleep. Does he not look sweet? My bonny, bonny boy! Go to your room, Elsie, and I will come directly and wish you good-night."

CHAPTER V.

IN CHURCH STREET.

Keep cool, and you command everybody.
ST.-JUST.

ELSIE felt strangely happy as she laid her head on the pillow that night. For the first time since her engagement, she was quite sure of her own feelings; she was beginning to understand Oliver. The remembrance of that little scene of reconciliation in the dimly-lighted hall still thrilled her; Oliver's singular irritability, so foreign to his usual calm languor, his outburst of tenderness, had surprised and touched her; she had never seen him so unlike himself; and yet she had never liked him so well.

As she dressed herself the next morning, she told herself that

nothing should make her offended with Oliver again; and she felt a shy undefinable pleasure at the idea of seeing him. It was slightly disappointing, then, when she entered the breakfast-room, to find only the Squire and his wife at the table.

They both welcomed her very kindly, but the girl's shrewdness at once guessed that some conjugal argument was on the *tapis*. Mrs. Romney looked a little flushed and anxious, and there was a shade of discontent on the Squire's brow.

"Am I late, Mrs. Romney? I believe I overslept myself."

A white muscular hand was stretched over Elsie's shoulder as Oliver sauntered into the room; the next moment some fragrant dewy roses lay on her plate, but his greeting was almost a silent one, and then he strolled leisurely to the side table and began carving some chicken. Meanwhile, the Squire stirred his coffee and went on with his grievance.

For the first time in their married life Mrs. Romney was contumacious; she had just informed him that she had some shopping to do in Draycott and that Oliver had offered to drive her in the dog-cart; and she had actually turned a deaf ear to his hints that the plan had better be given up, as her presence was indispensable to him that morning.

The Squire had some letters to write; and, as his household knew well, the Squire hated letters. His correspondence was invariably of the briefest description; and it was an old joke between husband and wife that even the longest of his love-letters during the period of their engagement had scarcely exceeded the first page.

Mrs. Romney generally acted as her husband's secretary; he found it impossible to arrive at any decision without her; for how was he to be sure what he meant unless Kitty were at his elbow to jog his memory and put things before him in her clear concise way? But for once Mrs. Romney was obdurate.

"The letters are not of the slightest importance, dear," she said, gently, for, if the truth were known, it was painful for her to refuse him anything. "Why should any one waste their time in-doors on such a lovely morning? Gran has promised to take Elsie for a drive. They are going across to Thornborough; we have arranged that between us; and you know, Romney, that you meant to ride over to Karslake to give your opinion on Colonel Faucit's new mare."

This was a decided stroke of policy. The Squire had forgotten all about his promise to Colonel Faucit; he was much obliged to Kitty for reminding him, but he had a notion that one day next week was the time mentioned; but his wife quietly negatived this. No date had been fixed; Romney was to ride over on the first opportunity. There was a fresh argument on this point, carried on by the Squire rather seriously, and opposed by his wife in a half-jesting manner. Oliver remained neutral during the discussion, and ate his breakfast in silence. Once the Squire appealed to him: had not Colonel Faucit suggested the following week? but, though Oliver had answered briefly in the affirmative, Mrs. Romney was not convinced.

What did it matter, she observed, cheerfully, which day Romney went? Colonel Faucit would be delighted to see him at any time; they

had so much in common, they had always so much to say to each other, that she never could get in a word. The first fine morning, she was sure the colonel meant; and had not Romney just informed her that the weather was breaking? Here an indignant disclaimer on the Squire's part; he had prophesied a shower or two,—nothing more, he would take his oath of that. But Mrs. Romney only shook her head at him smilingly. She had misunderstood him, she supposed, but all the same his correspondence would keep; she had glanced over his letters before breakfast, and not one of them required an immediate answer except Robert Carpenter's, and they had not made up their minds about that.

"I will think it over and let you know this evening, dear; it is no good deciding in a hurry; Oliver and I will talk it over while we drive into Draycott." But here there was another hitch: the Squire was not sure that the dog-cart could be used. Rufus had gone a little lame, and he meant to speak to the veterinary surgeon about him. Mrs. Romney seemed rather taken aback at this fresh obstacle; but Oliver came unexpectedly to her aid.

"I suppose I could drive Bob," he said, quietly; and, after a little more argument, it was finally decided that Bob should be put into the dog-cart and that the Squire should lock up his letters and ride over to Karslake; and then Mrs. Romney rose from the table with a look of relief.

"I hope you and my mother will get on all right," remarked Oliver, as he and Elsie strolled through the conservatory and he picked her some more roses. "You will not see my father: he is never visible until luncheon. It is hard lines my having to leave you, but it is no use grumbling, and we will make up for it in the evening. I will take you over to the east wing now and leave you in my mother's charge." Oliver's quiet decided tone allowed of no appeal, and Elsie reluctantly accompanied him.

They found Lady Carfax writing letters in a large sunny room with a bay-window looking out over the garden and lake. She received Elsie very graciously, and when Oliver had taken himself off she brought out some photographs and bade the girl amuse herself while she finished her letters, as the carriage would not be round for another hour.

Mrs. Romney came in for a moment by and by to bid them good-by. She wore her old gray dust-cloak, and seemed in a great hurry.

"I hope you and Gran will enjoy your drive, Elsie. Luncheon is always a movable feast at the Frythe. Gran is punctual,—you are always punctual, aren't you, dear?—but Romney and I have a knack of turning up at odd times. Well, adieu, dear friends: Oliver is waiting for me." And she nodded and vanished.

"I don't think Catherine seems in her usual spirits," observed Lady Carfax, as she closed her desk and took up her knitting. "She is the life of the house, generally,—Sir Henry calls her his sunbeam,—but she has been a little quieter lately. Romney noticed it the other evening. I hope you and Catherine will be great friends."

"I hope so too," returned Elsie, demurely.

"That is a pretty gown you have on, my dear," continued Lady Carfax, benignly. "I wish Catherine would take a little more pains with herself: she has a charming figure, and looks so well when she is properly dressed, but she is dreadfully careless about her appearance. I have asked her more than once not to wear that old gray dust-cloak, but she always puts me off with a laugh."

Elsie felt that she agreed with Lady Carfax, but she hardly liked to say so. To her relief, Lady Carfax did not seem to expect an answer. She had good old-fashioned notions on the subject of dress, and her daughter-in-law's disregard of appearances was an old grievance: so she proceeded to air her special views for the benefit of her young auditor:

"No one objects to extravagance more than I do, but we all owe a duty to society. As I often tell Catherine, my eldest son's wife has a position to maintain. I once heard a lady say at the County Ball that Mrs. Romney Carfax was the worst-dressed woman in the room; and yet I had begged and prayed Catherine to get a new dress for the occasion, but she flatly refused to do so."

"Perhaps Mrs. Romney doesn't care to spend her money on dress."

"But, my dear, she ought to care for her husband's sake; but Romney never takes my part in this; in his opinion his wife looks well in anything; he is utterly infatuated about her. He certainly makes her a most handsome allowance: so, as I tell her, her stinginess cannot be justified. Why, she actually told me the other day that she could not afford to buy herself a new cloak! Did you ever hear such nonsense? I often ask Catherine how she spends her money, but I never remember her answering me. She is very soft-hearted, and I expect she just flings it away on a number of worthless cases. She never can refuse a beggar."

"I am afraid I am very selfish and spend a great deal on myself," observed Elsie, regretfully: but Lady Carfax would not allow this: her future daughter-in-law was an heiress, and great latitude must be permitted her: besides, as she carefully pointed out to Elsie, Oliver was not like Romney; his wife's appearance would be a matter of importance to him; and all this was very pleasant doctrine to Elsie.

After this they prepared for their drive, and by and by Elsie found herself chatting quite happily to the formidable Lady Carfax. Lady Carfax seemed anxious to draw her out: she questioned her judiciously about her life at Banksland, and Elsie answered with her usual animation.

Presently Mrs. Romney's name came on the *tapis* again. Elsie wanted to know if her engagement had been a long one.

"No, dear, it was a very short one. Romney was in a hurry to be married." And here Lady Carfax hesitated a moment. "You are one of ourselves, Elsie, and perhaps Oliver has already told you that Catherine was a governess."

Elsie started: she was rather surprised to hear this.

"Romney met her at the Traffords': he and Cecil Trafford were great friends, and Romney often stayed at The Firs. I believe he fell in love with her the first time he saw her. Mrs. Trafford told me that

she was never more surprised in her life. Felicia, the eldest daughter, was an exceedingly handsome girl, and it must have seemed strange to her mother that Felicia was passed over and her governess preferred. I don't mind telling you, Elsie, that Sir Henry and I were not at all pleased with our son's choice; though Catherine is now our very dear child, and we would not change her for a dozen Felicias."

"And you did not see her until she was Mrs. Romney?"

"No. Romney was very firm about that. Romney has a strong will, though he seldom exercises it; but when he once makes up his mind it is very difficult to turn him from his purpose. He refused to subject Catherine to such an ordeal. 'You shall see her when she is my wife, mother,' he said to me, 'but not before,' and he kept his word. It was hard on me, was it not, Elsie? Romney was punishing me because I objected to his marriage."

"But you liked Mrs. Romney when you saw her," returned Elsie, who found a strange fascination in the subject.

Lady Carfax smiled as though at some amusing recollection. "I am afraid I shall shock you, but it is an old joke between Catherine and myself, and she often teases me about it: the first moment I saw her I said to myself, 'Can this plain and awkward young woman be my son's choice?' but before the evening was over I quite loved her. 'She is charming, Romney,'—those were my words when I bade him good-night. I can see his pleased look now. Do you know, my dear, when little Harry was born Catherine very nearly died. Romney was almost distracted, and I do not think I ever suffered so much in my life. He was quite haggard with misery. The very doctors were sorry for him. I shall never forget those days." And Lady Carfax shuddered.

"Mrs. Romney, somehow, fascinates me," returned Elsie, slowly. "I was rather prejudiced against her at first, but I see I am mistaken now."

"She certainly endears herself to every one," replied Lady Carfax. "Catherine is so utterly unselfish; she never spares herself if she can give any one pleasure. It was her long walks with Romney that led to the mischief; she never liked to own to him that she was tired, or to ask him to turn back. It was false tenderness, of course, for in the end she caused him great suffering, and I often tell her that it was absurd weakness on her part. 'Suppose you or Harry had died,' I once said to her. But she will never be allowed to expose herself to such risks again. Romney is so careful over her. I think she finds his restrictions a little oppressive: Catherine is such an active person, and really her health is superb, but when Romney takes her out now he is always afraid of tiring her. Catherine gets in quite a pet with him sometimes."

They had reached Thornborough by this time, and Lady Carfax suddenly remembered that she wanted to leave a message with a needlewoman who was doing some plain sewing for her. "It will not take us much longer to drive back by Draycott," she observed, "and it does not matter if we are a little late for luncheon."

When they reached Draycott Lady Carfax directed the coachman

to drive her to Church Street, and when they arrived she prepared to descend from the carriage. "I shall not be long," she observed, "but I know Mrs. Evans wants me to select the trimming. Catherine would have done it for me, but I quite forgot to remind her. I will try not to keep you long waiting."

Elsie made an appropriate answer. She assured Lady Carfax she did not in the least mind waiting; then she leaned back listlessly in the carriage and wondered how people could live in such a dull street; the high narrow houses and their wearisome uniformity oppressed her, and not even the grand tower of Draycott Church at the end of the street could reconcile her to the dulness.

Mrs. Evans's house was made conspicuous by a hanging plant and a canary; a little lower down there was a wire blind and some ugly yellow curtains. How could any one tolerate a wire blind? thought Elsie: and then she started slightly. At an upper window she had caught a momentary glimpse of a face she recognized. It was only for an instant, but Elsie had unusually keen sight, and she was sure it was Mrs. Romney. She had come forward to the window and had immediately drawn back. There had been no sign of recognition at the sight of Elsie and the carriage. A moment later the blind was lowered.

Elsie remained staring at the blind until Lady Carfax returned; but when she mentioned the fact of her seeing Mrs. Romney Lady Carfax smiled a little sceptically. "I think you must be mistaken, my dear. Catherine knows no one in Church Street except Mrs. Evans, and she never employs her. Surely that is Mr. Lockhart, Elsie: no one could mistake him," as the little man approached with a radiant face. He wore a brown velveteen coat and knickerbockers, and had an enormous Maréchal Niel rose in his button-hole.

"I saw the Carfax liveries," he observed, blandly, "and could not resist coming to speak to you.—Good morning, Miss—Humph-humph," with a beaming smile at Elsie, which faded into utter blankness as Lady Carfax ruthlessly dispelled an illusion:

"I thought you were introduced to Miss Vaughan yesterday. My son Oliver, as you know, is engaged to this young lady."

"I was not aware that I was speaking to Miss Vaughan," returned Mr. Lockhart, ruefully. "I am very sorry—I mean, I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Vaughan. My friend the captain is a lucky man. I must congratulate him when I see him." And here the little man gave vent to a gusty sigh. "Well, well, I must not keep you, Lady Carfax. I wonder what attraction you ladies find in Church Street. I met Mrs. Romney here the other evening. Well, give my respects to Sir Henry." But he remained as though glued to the curb until the carriage was out of sight.

"Is not that the dog-cart, Elsie, that I see across the market-place?" asked Lady Carfax, suddenly, and Elsie answered in the affirmative. Oliver was driving rapidly out of the town; the groom's seat was empty, and Mrs. Romney was not with him.

CHAPTER VI.

BY THE LAKE-SIDE.

> And I will pu' the pink, the emblem o' my dear,
> For she's the pink o' womankind, and blooms without a peer.
>
> BURNS.

LADY CARFAX and Elsie had luncheon together, and then Lady Carfax begged the girl to amuse herself until the others returned, as Sir Henry always expected her to read to him in the afternoon. Elsie was not sorry to be left to her own devices. She went in search of a book, and then strolled down the grassy slope towards the little lake. A certain nook had taken her fancy,—a low seat shaded by an acacia. From this seat the house was quite hidden, and only a thick fringe of shrubbery with a narrow winding walk through it skirted the lake round which she and the Squire had paced the preceding evening.

How still and tranquil it looked this afternoon! The rippling surface of the water was flecked by purple shadows; a small fleet of yellow ducklings sailed aimlessly to and fro, while some foreign ducks plumed themselves on the bank, and two majestic swans floated in stately pride with white arching necks and glossy wings outspread in the sunshine.

Elsie's book lay unopened on her lap. She was not a great reader, and how could she read when blue dragon-flies were skimming across the water, and a sudden splash of a water-rat distracted her attention, when blue-tits and green finches darted to and fro among the branches, and the thrush and the blackbird competed like minstrels at a feast?

Elsie fell into a delicious revery until quick springing steps brought the expectant light to her eyes; and the next moment Oliver was beside her.

"I thought you were never coming back," she observed, reproachfully, as he threw himself at her feet and tossed his straw hat on the grass with the air of a man who feels that he has fairly earned his rest. "What have you done with Mrs. Romney, Oliver?"

"She and Romney are shut up in the library. My dearly beloved brother is in some fuss about a letter which must catch the afternoon post, so Mrs. Romney refused to own that she had a headache, though she is only fit to lie down and have a nap."

"I thought your brother was at Karslake?"

"Oh, he went over there, but Colonel Faucit and the mare had gone to Bolton. After all, he was not expected until next week, so he came in late for luncheon, and Mrs. Romney had a pretty severe lecture for sending him off on such a wild-goose chase."

"Was he angry with her?"

"Angry? Not a bit. Romney is the best tempered fellow in the world, but he dearly loves a grumble. You may be sure that Mrs. Romney was far more vexed than he. She is writing letters for him as a sort of penance: she furnishes all the ideas, and Romney smokes and fancies that he is hard at work. When they have finished they will go up and have a romp with Harry."

"Oh, Oliver, I want to tell you something. I saw Mrs. Romney

at some window in Church Street, and, though she must have seen the carriage, she did not take the slightest notice of me."

"In Church Street? Are you sure?" asked Oliver, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Quite sure. I saw her distinctly. She had her gray cloak on, and her big Spanish-looking hat. No one wears that sort of hat now: so of course I noticed it."

"Did my mother see her too?"

"No; and she only laughed at me when I mentioned the fact. She says Mrs. Romney knows no one in Church Street."

"Oh, I would not be too sure of that," returned Oliver, indifferently, as though the subject did not interest him. "Mrs. Romney has a large circle of acquaintance, but they do not all belong to the upper classes. They include all sorts and conditions of men. She is very philanthropic in her views."

"Do you know, Lady Carfax told me something about Mrs. Romney that surprised me very much? I had no idea that she had been a governess."

"I wonder why my mother chose to impart that unnecessary piece of information," returned Oliver, rather dryly. "She is perfectly devoted to Mrs. Romney, and so is my father, but they never can forget this fact. I have always respected Romney because he is so free from prejudice. I remember when he told me about his engagement that his words to me were, 'Whatever the home people say, remember I am marrying a thorough gentlewoman. Catherine's poverty has nothing to do with herself. Her father is a gentleman who has known better days. She has had a hard life, poor girl, and yet she has such a happy nature.'"

"Your brother met her at a friend's house?"

"Yes. I will tell you all about it," returned Oliver, who was secretly amused at Elsie's interest in his brother's love-affairs: all women were romantic, he thought. "There was a family dinner-party at the Traffords', and he sat by her. He knew, of course, that she was the governess. A deaf spinster aunt sat at his right hand: so he was glad to talk to Catherine. Her conversation interested him, he thought her so frank and unconscious in manner, but he lost his heart to her a few hours later when he heard her singing little Phœbe to sleep in the dark school-room. Phœbe—poor little soul, she is dead now—was a sad invalid, and at times suffered a good deal.

"Romney told me that he was just running up-stairs to fetch something he had left in his room, and as he walked down the passage he heard a clear sweet voice singing Keble's Evening Hymn; the pure liquid notes arrested him, and after a moment he advanced towards the half-opened door of the school-room. Catherine was standing by the window with the child in her arms. He could see her face distinctly in the moonlight; she was singing with her whole soul, and in his eyes she looked like some radiant young St. Cecilia. As Romney crept from the door he said to himself, in an awed voice, 'That girl shall be my wife,' and before two months were over they were engaged."

"I am so glad you have told me this, Oliver. It is almost as interesting as a novel."

"What a romantic child! I wish Romney could hear you. But Catherine's happiness was rather chequered at first. The Traffords were not pleased with the engagement, and they have been very cold to Romney ever since. They wanted him to fall in love with Felicia, the eldest daughter, a very handsome girl; and Mrs. Trafford accused Catherine of designing underhand ways. The poor girl had rather a life of it; it was all pique and jealousy on their part; but Romney settled matters in an off-hand fashion by marrying Catherine as soon as possible. He would not hear of waiting for an outfit: she could get everything she wanted in Paris. And so he had his way. Now, darling, I think we have talked enough about Mrs. Romney. If you like to put on your hat I will take you for a walk,—unless you would prefer a game of tennis." But Elsie voted for the walk.

Elsie professed herself delighted with Fordham; and she and Oliver stopped for a few minutes to admire the view. Below them lay a green park-like meadow, with trees and browsing cattle, and in the centre Fordham Church, with its fine tower and the sunset clouds behind it. Oliver took her in presently to see the church, and Elsie expressed her admiration of the carved oaken screen and beautiful painted windows; and as they sauntered through the carefully-kept churchyard she observed that in her opinion Fordham was an ideal village.

"It is so bright and cleanly," she continued, "and then the church is so beautiful. I think Mrs. Romney is very fortunate to have such pleasant surroundings. She tells me the vicar and his wife are charming people, and that there is no lack of delightful neighbors."

"Don't you think we shall be just as fortunate at Dene?" observed Oliver, gravely. "Banksland has one advantage over the Frythe—there is the river." And then, with pardonable egotism, he began enlarging on his own prospects. There was some fear that his regiment might be ordered to India. He had been talking to Romney about that last night, and he was very keen about their marrying as soon as possible. "I could not leave you behind, Elsie," he continued, wistfully. But Elsie refused to be drawn into any sort of discussion. "Uncle George would not hear of her marrying yet," she answered, "and if Oliver were ordered to India he must exchange into another regiment: that was all." But Oliver shook his head at this.

"Never mind. I will get Mrs. Romney to talk to you," he returned. "If I go to India,—and go I must before another year is out,—I do not intend to leave my wife behind." But Elsie turned a deaf ear to this. She wanted Oliver to tell her the name of the little speckled bird on the hawthorn bough; and did he see that rabbit sitting up on end and stroking its dear little whiskers with its paws? In fact, there was no end to Elsie's inquisitiveness. Oliver smiled at the girl's wilfulness. He could bide his time. Elsie would not let him go alone, he knew that. She might tease him and argue with him, but her heart was safely in his keeping. When the right time came, the young heiress of Banksland would follow her husband as faithfully as

the wife of any non-commissioned officer. "She has plenty of backbone, in spite of her skittishness, and she is as sweet as she is sound," had been the Squire's criticism the previous night. "Don't leave her behind you, Oliver. India will do her no harm for a year or two. When you have earned your laurels and done your duty to your queen and country, you can take to farming and a country gentleman's life, if you like." And, as Oliver shared this opinion and was a thorough soldier at heart, no amount of coaxing on Elsie's part would have induced him to remain in England. "You have promised to be a soldier's wife, my sweet, and you must not tempt me to desert my post," he said later on when he renewed the subject; and Elsie dropped her pretty little head in silence, for she knew that Oliver was right. The secret of his influence with her was his unswerving truth, and also his deeply-ingrained sense of duty: other men prevaricated; they had principles, but they sought to evade them: their words were uncertain, and their standard was the world's standard. Oliver was absolutely true,—Mrs. Romney had told her that; and she was beginning to find it out for herself: yes, he was true himself, and he demanded truth in others. She must take care not to disappoint him.

"We will have our ride to-morrow," he observed as they turned in at the gate of the Frythe; and Elsie agreed happily to this. Oliver had been charming all the way home: he had dropped the awkward subject of India, and amused Elsie with some of his Aldershot experiences and some humorous stories that his brother officers had told him. Only now and then a word betrayed his confidence about the future:

"You will like our colonel, Elsie. He is a splendid fellow; and Mrs. Fullerton is such a nice motherly woman. She will take you under her wing directly. All the young married ladies go to her for advice. She mothers them all." Or,

"Maxwell is such a useful servant. I find him invaluable: he thinks nothing a trouble; you will find him a handy fellow in packing. Every one envies me such a treasure. And then he loves Indian life."

"You must let me go now, Oliver. There is the dressing-bell. Thank you for taking me for such a delightful walk."

"I will send you up some flowers," was Oliver's answer, as he turned in the direction of the conservatory. "Any color will do, I suppose, as you always wear white in the evening." Nevertheless Oliver made his choice slowly and fastidiously. As he gathered some maidenhair fern, Mrs. Romney came into the conservatory: she was still in her walking-dress, and looked pale and weary; and there was a dark shade under her eyes.

"Well, Oliver?" a little abruptly.

"Oh, yes, she saw you," trying to reach a tempting-looking bud over his head. "Elsie has sharp eyes. It was foolish of you to go to the window. I dare say the servants saw you too."

"Yes, I caught Martin's eye; not that it matters, but Elsie would chatter to Gran about me: did she wonder very much, Oliver, at seeing me in such a poky little house?"

"No, she was only curious for a moment; but of course I took it

as a matter of course. Rab was in the town, too. I came across him once or twice. You will have to be careful, Catherine."

"Yes, I know," sighing, "and by nature I am so incautious. Thank you, Oliver dear, for all you have done for me. I wish I could do something for you in return."

"You can do something, Catherine," in rather a peculiar tone. "Be a brave woman and tell Romney: nothing would please me so well as that."

"Ah, no, not now—not until—oh, you know what I mean. There is no need for me to explain. It is cruel of you to say that, Oliver, when you know how it would pain Romney."

"You are wrong. You are making a grievous mistake." And Oliver's voice was somewhat stern. "You are a good woman, Catherine, but on this point you are lamentably wrong. I told you so last night. You are disappointing me terribly."

"Hush, hush! there is Romney." And the next moment the Squire made his appearance. He was in evening dress, and it was evident that his object was to select his button-hole.

"Why, Catherine," with a surprised glance at her dress, "you will be late for dinner. Why on earth are you wasting your time chattering with Oliver? I never saw such a woman for talking in my life."

"I will be ready in a moment, dear." And she brushed quickly past him. And as Oliver muttered something about being late too, the Squire found himself alone.

"I wonder what has come to Kitty," he mused. "She is not half as bright as usual, and she always seems in a hurry. Her head used not to ache as it does now. I think I will ask Fergusson to have a look at her: only Kitty does so hate fuss and doctoring, and she always says there is nothing the matter with her; but she looked uncommonly queer just now," grumbled the Squire as he adjusted the flower in his coat.

CHAPTER VII.

A HEATED ARGUMENT.

Then he will talk,—great gods, how he will talk!
NATHANIEL LEE.

DURING dinner the shower that had been foretold by the Squire pattered lightly against the window-panes, and Elsie observed, in a tone of regret, that they would have to spend the evening in-doors.

"Catherine will have to sing to us," suggested Lady Carfax. "My daughter-in-law is an accomplished musician," she continued, addressing Elsie; "she has a very sweet, well-trained voice, that gives us all a great deal of pleasure."

"You must not praise me too highly, Gran, or Elsie will be disappointed," returned Mrs. Romney, smiling.—"I know you sing too," turning to the girl. "My husband is very fond of music, and Oliver also, so our efforts to amuse them will not be thrown away." And as soon as they returned to the drawing-room, Elsie was coaxed to the piano. Her voice was sweet, though not powerful, and her perform-

ance was warmly praised, and it was with some reluctance that Mrs. Romney consented to take her place.

"I am in no mood for singing to-night," she observed in a low tone to Oliver, who was lingering by the piano.

"Why don't you make your headache an excuse, then? I can see it is pretty bad," was his sensible reply; but Mrs. Romney hesitated and glanced at her husband.

He had seated himself in a large easy-chair by the window, and his whole attitude expressed intense enjoyment. The Squire was passionately fond of music, and his greatest pleasure was to hear his wife sing. In his opinion, Elsie's fresh young voice was nothing in comparison; when Catherine sang, her whole soul seemed wrapped in her song, and as her clear, penetrating voice reached his ears, the Squire's thoughts would travel back to a certain scene that persistently haunted him,—a girl with the face of a St. Cecilia singing to a sick child in the moonlight: how distinctly he could recall that scene, and the sudden strange beating of his heart, as he looked at the graceful figure, and the coils of dark hair against the white neck, and vowed to himself that she, and she only, should be his wife!

"I must not disappoint him," she whispered; and, as usual, she sang for him, and him alone. What did it matter to Catherine if the room were crowded with admiring auditors? To her there was only one listener, the big fair-haired man at the other end of the room. She knew well how those honest blue-gray eyes would glisten as she sang "Auld Robin Gray" or "Home they brought her warrior dead." Indeed, she knew how to play on every sensitive chord in her husband's heart. Sometimes when she sang some stirring ballad or wild warlike strain, Romney would start up from his chair and pace up and down the room, with his head erect, and his eyes shining with enthusiasm.

"Bravo, Kitty! that was splendid," he would say with a long-drawn sigh of excitement. "That makes me feel as though I want to fight. By Jove, if I had a Zulu or two here!" and the Squire's clinched fist was suggestive; but his pugnacity died a natural death, and he grew restful and quiet, as some solemn strain of Handel's floated across the room. "He shall feed His flock," Catherine sang that grandly, or "Let the bright Seraphim," the radiant St. Cecilia look always came into her face then. At such moments Romney almost worshipped his wife.

Elsie listened delightedly, as Mrs. Romney sang that evening; she told Oliver afterwards that she had never heard a more beautiful voice; but the Squire moved a little restlessly in his chair: something was amiss with Catherine's songs to-night; they sounded tame and spiritless, as though the singer's thoughts were far away; once her voice quavered and broke, and she recovered herself with an effort. By and by she stopped abruptly. "I cannot sing more to-night, dear," she said, apologetically. "I feel stupid and tired." Then the Squire was on the alert in a moment. What had tired her? Any one could see she was not herself. He insisted on knowing what ailed her, in rather an authoritative voice. A little headache? was she sure there was nothing more? certain? positive? why had she taken the trouble to sing to them? she was a silly woman, and he desired that she would sit

perfectly quiet until bedtime; he would put a shade on the lamp if the light were too strong for her eyes.

Mrs. Romney accepted the shade with gratitude and took up her knitting; she was sorry to be so stupid, but headaches were stupid things; she begged every one else to be as lively as possible. What was Gran reading? was it an amusing story? and at this question Lady Carfax laid down her book and pince-nez, with a dissatisfied air. With regard to novels, she was a severe critic; in her opinion, her humble opinion, the novels of the present day were remarkably deficient in originality and power; their incidents were far-fetched and impossible; and as Lady Carfax was an inveterate reader, it must be owned that she had a tolerable acquaintance with most of the leading novels. Nothing pleased her better than to point out the defects and weak passages of the last-read work of fiction; and it was just possible that Mrs. Romney knew this, when she so innocently asked if Gran's story were amusing.

"I suppose most people would call it amusing, my dear," she returned, guardedly; "the descriptions are good as a whole, and it is not badly written,"—this was probably the fact, as the book had been written by one of the first novelists of the day,—"but I should never have thought that it had been written by a man."

"Why not, mother?" this question being put rather lazily by the Squire; he was sitting on the couch beside his wife in a regular Darby-and-Joan fashion. Lady Carfax's views on literature always amused her sons.

"Because his hero, the young doctor, is so absurdly quixotic: he actually hesitates for a long time before he proposes to the girl, because she happens to be rich. Most men would think money an advantage to a woman."

"Not in my opinion," returned Romney, looking at his wife with a smile, and totally ignoring the fact that his brother was engaged to an heiress; but Oliver was equal to the occasion.

"Hamerton would agree with you, old fellow: don't you recollect that telling passage?—I read it out to you and Mrs. Romney, because I thought it so good,—'Marriage is a lifelong conversation, and I have never found that conversation with any lady was more interesting because she had money in her purse.'"

"Capital!" chuckled the Squire. "Marriage is a lifelong conversation, eh, Kitty?"

"Hamerton said something equally good," went on Oliver, quietly. "'To marry a woman of whom you know nothing, is to intrust your children to a woman of whom you know as little.'"

"Well, that is true too," observed the Squire, but Mrs. Romney interrupted them rather wickedly:

"A man may spare,"

she chanted,

"And still be bare,
If his wife be nowt, if his wife be nowt,
But a man may spend,
And have money to lend,
If his wife be owt, if his wife be owt."

"Hear! hear!" observed the Squire, delighted with the aptness of the quotation; but Lady Carfax, who was deficient in humor, treated this interruption with quiet disdain: her head was still full of her novel.

"A well-told story ought to be true to life," she continued, sententiously. "There is false sentiment, I should say, almost a diseased sentiment, in the doctor's character."

"Bother the doctor!" muttered Oliver, and Elsie laughed at his bored expression, but Romney inquired amiably if the doctor and the heiress had hit it off at last.

"They are married, if you mean that, but the misunderstandings have begun in the second volume; the wife has some secret intrusted to her, which she is unable to tell him, and he has found it out, and in consequence they are on the eve of a separation: the poor girl is not a bit to blame, and it is mere persecution on his part. The fact is, he demands impossibilities. Just listen to this passage, Catherine! 'When I married you, I understood that I was to share your life; that we were to be really and truly united for time and eternity; that is the essence and meaning of marriage. But now you have shut me out from your confidence, there is a part of your life from which I am excluded; as your husband, I have a right to demand thorough confidence: your very thoughts are mine.'"

"The fellow is a prig," murmured Oliver. "Don't be afraid, Elsie; I shall never demand your confidence in that high-flown and despotic manner."

"I don't agree with you," returned his brother. "I take the doctor's part." And the Squire got up from his seat and took possession of the rug, a sure sign that he was disposed for an argument. "It is a foregone conclusion with all sensible people that absolute confidence is imperative between a man and his wife, and I know Catherine holds the same views."

"There are exceptions to every rule," she returned, in rather a low voice. "I have read the book, Romney; it is a painful story, but I took the wife's part throughout; if she deceived her husband, it was for his own good, and she suffered most bitterly."

"Stuff! nonsense!" retorted the Squire, thoroughly annoyed at this. "As though any woman could treat her husband as though he were a child! 'Deceived him for his good'! I wonder at you, Catherine, for going over to the enemy in this fashion; but you are only contradicting me for the sake of argument. In my opinion," still more obstinately, "no circumstances could justify any wife in keeping a secret from her husband; it is absolute disloyalty; she is acting a daily lie, and——"

"Oh, no, Romney," and Catherine dropped her work and spoke in an agitated voice, "please do not say such dreadful things! but of course you do not mean them. A wife may be loyal to her husband in every thought and fibre of her being, and yet she may be so unhappily placed, there may be conflicting duties, troubles that she must keep to herself.—Oh, Oliver," almost passionately, "why do you not take my part? But you are men, and you do not understand."

"Why, Catherine," and the Squire regarded her with surprise,

"how pale you look, and there are actually tears in your eyes! You foolish child, to agitate yourself so over a mere argument!"

"Because I feel it so deeply, and you are all against me, except Gran,—even Oliver."

"Yes, even Oliver." And Captain Carfax looked at her rather meaningly.

"Of course I know that, and it seems so hard, it almost crushes me. Romney, it makes me unhappy even to differ from you in an argument. I want your opinions to be mine; I never willingly disagree with you; but there may be circumstances——"

But it was not easy to silence the Squire; he was singularly tenacious in an argument: Catherine's persistence did not please him.

"Now, look here, Catherine," he said, authoritatively, "if novel-reading is going to infuse those pernicious ideas into your head, the less you read them the better: they would not do me any harm; I should hold my own views all the same, and no amount of brilliant meretricious arguments would influence me. But I will read the book and judge for myself. But I tell you this, you and my mother are both wrong; if I had been that doctor fellow, I should never have had confidence in that woman again. 'You have deceived me once for my good, and perhaps next time you will deceive me for your own,'—I should say that to her; 'and as I value truth before everything, perhaps we had better——' Why, Catherine, my darling, what ails you?" for Mrs. Romney's face was buried in her hands, and she was shivering visibly, but at his touch she started up almost wildly.

"You are cruel, all of you! you have no right to talk so! Let me go, Romney: all this stupid talk has made my head worse." But, though she laughed in a forced manner, her face was very pale. "No, don't come with me," as her husband followed her. "Go back, Romney dear; I would rather be alone."

The Squire returned to the hearth-rug in a crestfallen manner.

"What has come over Catherine? I never saw her like this before. I am sure she must be ill. Mother, don't you think I had better send for Fergusson?" but Lady Carfax shook her head.

"She has a bad headache, and our discussion has excited her. Catherine has very deep feelings; once before she was a little hysterical,—don't you remember, Romney, when that Ferard affair happened? The poor woman was wholly to blame, and no one in their senses would have dreamt of taking her part; but Catherine made herself perfectly miserable about her. You were quite angry with her then."

"Yes, I remember; but that was a very different matter, mother. I could understand Catherine being upset then, but to be hysterical over a novel! Well, I shall go and have a smoke." And there was a cloud on the Squire's brow as he bade the ladies good-night and went off to his den.

"Shall I go up to Catherine, Oliver?" asked Lady Carfax, a little anxiously.

"I think you had better leave her alone," was his cautious reply. "This is a stupid ending to the evening, Elsie," he continued, as he lighted her candle. "Mrs. Romney seldom gives way like this; she

is over-tired, and has had a worrying day. I tell her sometimes that she cultivates the emotional side of her nature too much: she wants more ballast."

Oliver's speech was a little too bracing for Elsie: she felt vaguely sorry for Mrs. Romney: it was unkind to go off to her own room and not bid her good-night. She hesitated for a moment as she passed the door, and then she took courage and knocked.

A faint "Come in" gave her permission to enter. The room was large and full of shadows, but she could dimly discern a dark figure standing by the window. "I could not go to bed without wishing you good-night," observed the girl, apologetically. "Is your head very bad, Mrs. Romney? Can I do anything for you? Oh, dear!" as a low sob reached her ear, "you are fretting about something. That is so wrong: it will make your head worse."

"No, it will relieve me. I do not often cry; my husband hates me to shed a tear. Where is Romney? Was he vexed with me? I have never been so silly before, but—but—I felt as though my heart would break when he said that," leaning her head against Elsie as she stood beside her in the darkness. Mrs. Romney had sunk into a chair as she spoke, as though her strength had failed her.

"Dear Mrs. Romney, you will make yourself quite ill," observed the girl, anxiously. "Why, your hands are like ice! Would you like me to go to Mr. Carfax? He is in the smoking-room with Oliver. Perhaps if you talked to him it would do you good."

"Nothing would do me good to-night, and I would not have my husband see me like this for the world; it would trouble him so, and he would give me no peace; a night's sleep, that is what I want. Oh, Elsie, when you marry Oliver, never keep anything from him, however small and foolish it may be; men are not like us, they have such hard fixed rules; they do not make allowances; truth, they will have that at any cost."

"I shall like to tell Oliver everything," returned Elsie, simply. "I could not hide anything if I tried."

"We are alike in that, Elsie dear. I love truth as dearly as you do. I am a bad actress, whatever Oliver may say. I have always been so frank and outspoken, and I loathe any form of deceit; one's husband is one's self. Oh, you will understand it some day; one does not easily lie to one's self."

"No, of course not." But Elsie was a little bewildered. If Mrs. Romney had anything on her mind, why did she not tell her husband? But had she anything on her mind? Last night she had seemed so bright and radiant, so full of overflowing spirits.

"Do not talk any more to me to-night, Elsie," was Mrs. Romney's next speech. "In some moods I am better alone. My husband will be coming up directly, and I want him to think I am asleep. I must just go and kiss Harry, and then I will go to bed. Don't trouble about me any more, dear child: I shall be all right to-morrow." And Elsie felt herself dismissed.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MATCH-MAKER.

Jog on, jog on the foot-path way,
And merrily hent the stile-a;
A merry heart goes all the way,
Your sad tires in a mile-a.

Winter's Tale.

WHEN Elsie went down-stairs the next morning she found the family gathered round the breakfast-table. Mrs. Romney greeted her with an affectionate smile: she looked pale and jaded, as though she had passed an unrefreshing night, but she spoke with her usual animation. The Squire had evidently slept off his dissatisfaction, and was in capital spirits: to Elsie's intense surprise, he alluded jestingly to the last night's argument:

"Catherine has recovered her temper, you see. We need not be afraid of saying anything to her this morning. We have had it out, and she has promised to be a better woman for the future, and to allow her husband to have the last word. No more contradiction, eh, Mrs. Kitty?"

"Were you speaking to me, love?" and Mrs. Romney's tone was very gentle. "I was wondering just then what was the matter with the urn: will you help me with it, Romney?" and the Squire rose with the utmost alertness. A domestic emergency always pleased him: he liked to lecture, and find fault, and dominate over his womenkind in a peremptory good-natured way. Kitty was reproved and set on one side and admonished as though she were an infant. Another time she would have laughed in his face and told him that he was a goose and knew nothing about urns; but this morning she listened to him meekly, and as he stooped over her Elsie saw her rest her cheek against his coat-sleeve for a moment, and a great sadness came into her beautiful eyes.

"Elsie and I are going to ride over to Crome this morning," observed Oliver, when the Squire had returned to his seat. "What are you good people going to do with yourselves?"

"Catherine and I are going to drive to Repton," returned his brother. "A drive will do her good; for she looks uncommonly seedy. We shall come back by Draycott, and I shall look in at the club and read the papers while Catherine does her chores: she seems uncommonly fond of shopping just now," finished the Squire, mischievously, and a deep flush rose to his wife's face.

"You proposed the club yourself, dear. My business can very well wait." But the Squire received this remark with good-natured derision; and for the remainder of the meal he seemed bent on teasing his wife and putting her out of countenance.

Elsie enjoyed her ride through the long deep lanes fragrant with honeysuckle and sweet-brier roses. The steep shady banks were lined with hart's-tongue fern; and beyond the wide stretch of meadow-lands rose the dark purple range of hills, casting their shadows over the whole country. They rode slowly with slackened reins under the dark arching trees: the still beauty of the summer morning, with its

freshness and perfume and exuberance of young quivering life, seemed to fill Elsie's nerves with quicksilver; and Oliver's mood was almost as joyous as hers.

"If we could always be young," sighed Elsie, "and it were always summer. I do so hate getting old, Oliver! Can you fancy me with wrinkles and gray hairs like old Mrs. Spiller at the Lodge?"

"We shall grow old together, darling,—that is one blessing," returned her companion, with an admiring glance at the slight trim figure beside him. Elsie's fair hair was dishevelled, her eyes were bright with youth and happiness. Would those pink cheeks ever grow pallid and lined? would there be crow's-feet under the smiling eyes? Perpetual youth and summer, that was what Elsie wished; she would have had flowers grow all the year round in that improbable country of her dreams.

Oliver smiled a little gravely over the girl's quaint conceit. He had a notion that life meant something better than unclouded sunshine. Youth at its best was immaturity: the growing instinct that is in all healthy human nature could not be restrained in this fashion: the many-sided aspects of life, its working days and stormy nights, its autumns and winters and brief changeable springs, were more alluring to Oliver than Elsie's perpetual summer.

"I am not afraid of growing old," continued Oliver, thoughtfully, "but I must have my life first; when I have fought a few battles and done something for my country I will not refuse to lie still on my oars. Nothing lasts in this world; even our ride, perfect as it has been, must come to an end," as they turned in at the gates.

Mrs. Romney was watching for them at the hall door. She ran down the steps to pet the horses.

"Romney is on the tennis-ground marking out the courts," she said, as she produced some lumps of sugar from her pocket. Jess was already rubbing her arm with soft dainty lips, as though asking for the delicacy. Oliver, who was detaching Elsie's small foot from the stirrup, lifted her down, and then turned to his sister-in-law:

"Surely you have not been to Repton and back in this time?"

"Oh, no; Romney changed his mind, and after all we only drove in to Draycott. He had to go to the bank and to one or two places; and neither of us cared for a longer drive.—Elsie dear, do not trouble to change your habit before luncheon. It is just ready. We have some people coming this afternoon to tennis, and you can make yourself smart by three o'clock."

"Catherine did not want to go to Repton," observed Mr. Carfax as he took his seat, "so I just overhauled the papers at the club while she did her errands.—I saw you ordering groceries, Kitty, as Rab and I passed Williams. Who was that young lady to whom you were talking so earnestly?"

"Young lady?" returned his wife, rather hurriedly. "Whom could you mean, Romney?"

"Oh, Rab saw you first: he is a regular ferret, and puts his nose into everything. 'There's your wife, Squire,' he said, 'and she is talking to an overgrown child in pink cotton. Let us go in and speak

to her.' But I was in a hurry, so I could not wait. Who was your friend, Kitty?"

"Romney, do you mind telling me what figure you gave for Jess?" asked Oliver, abruptly. "She carried Elsie splendidly this morning. Excuse me for interrupting you, Mrs. Romney, but I am writing to Malings by this afternoon's post; and he is going to look out for a likely mare. Romney is a good judge of horseflesh, and I want to put Malings up to a trick or two."

"Jess was a regular bargain," returned the Squire, somewhat flattered by this praise, and the next minute they were in eager discussion. Mrs. Romney drew a quick breath, and then turned to Elsie. She wanted to know what she intended to wear that afternoon. "You must make yourself pretty, because the Pollocks are coming, and they are very big people;" but it may be doubted whether she heard the girl's answer. She rose from the table before the gentlemen had finished. "Come, Gran," she said, imperiously, "there is no need to wait for them. When Romney talks about horses, he sits half the afternoon." But the Squire's voice called her back before they had reached the door.

"What a hurry you are in, Kitty! and I forgot to tell you something: Rab has asked us all to dinner to-morrow, and will take no refusal. I made an excuse for you, mother, that you never leave the Pater in the evening, but the rest of us will have to go. How he will seat us all in that room is a problem that Rab must solve; but I am almost suffocated by the prospect beforehand."

"How absurd Mr. Lockhart is with his invitations!" returned Mrs. Romney, with unusual irritation. "You might have refused, Romney: you know we would all much rather stay at home."

"Speak for yourself, Kitty. An evening at The Hut is very good fun, and when you once get into your chair it is not so bad, and, by Jove, he has a capital cook. I respect that woman. Mrs. Brattle has a vocation. The Brattle sauces are not to be despised."

"Don't talk in that ridiculous way, Romney, or Elsie will think you are a gourmand. He does not really mind what he eats, Elsie; bread and cheese would content him: he puts on these epicurean airs to make you believe he is dainty."

"I knew that would fetch Kitty," laughed the Squire. "She thinks Rab a sensualist because he likes a good dinner and is rather fastidious about his wines: she is a bit of a Puritan in her way, and thinks it shocking waste of money to drink good wine. Well, my dear, I am sorry Rab's impromptu feast does not please you, because I told him that we should be delighted to come.—Don't you think it will be great fun?" turning to Elsie; and Elsie could not deny that she thought it would be amusing; she was sure Mr. Lockhart would be a droll host.

"Very well, we will go, then," returned Mrs. Romney, resignedly. "You must put on your oldest gown, for there is hardly space to turn in Rab's rooms, they are so crowded with curiosities. It is a pretty little house," she continued, as they went up-stairs, "but Rab has no idea of arrangement; he buys everything that takes his fancy, and Mrs. Brattle has to find room for it. Oh, you recollect that I told

you I had a little scheme in my head: there is a poor little governess I know, such a harmless gentle little creature, who would make an excellent wife for Rab. Wait a moment: I shall have to take Romney into confidence, after all.—Romney," as he came up out of the dining-room at that instant with his cigarette-case in his hand, "do you mind if I ask Gussie Poole to-morrow to stay for a day or two? She has not been here for months?"

"Gussie Poole!" in a disgusted tone. "My dear child, what an idea! Oliver always finds her such an infliction; and he hates people being here during his visits."

"Gussie will not be in his way: she is always with me or Harry," returned his wife, in a pleading tone. "I had such a forlorn little note from her this morning: she has lost her situation, the people are going abroad, and she is so miserable with that step-mother of hers. She lives in Draycott, Elsie, and we could drive over in the wagonette to-morrow and fetch her."

"But why to-morrow? You know we are going to dine at The Hut. If you must have her, she could come the next day."

"Oh, I shall take her to The Hut; you know Rab always expects us to bring our guests," and now Mrs. Romney's eyes began to glisten with mischief. "Don't be tiresome, dear, and thwart my little scheme: I have set my heart on taking Gussie." Then the Squire burst into a great laugh.

"So that is your little game, Kitty? You silly woman, do you suppose Rab, with all his oddities, will fall in love with that washed-out little creature? Besides, he has seen her."

"Indeed he has not," replied Mrs. Romney. "Gussie has only stayed with us once, and Rab was away; and she is a good little thing, and not really plain, if she had enough to eat and her clothes were not so shabby."

"Pshaw! Well, do as you like." And the Squire turned on his heel. Catherine's *protégées* were legion, and they were none of them too well dressed, but he secretly chuckled over the idea that Rab, who was a gentleman in spite of his eccentricities, and came of an old family, should cast admiring eyes on a little pale-faced girl like Gussie.

"I am half in joke and half in earnest," went on Mrs. Romney, as she followed Elsie into her room. "I have such a fellow-feeling for poor Gussie, she is such a good little soul, such a hard-working, noble little creature, quite a heroine in her small way, and she has one of the typical fairy-tale sort of step-mother; but," checking herself, "I will not trust myself to speak of that woman."

"And she is a governess?"

"Yes, a daily governess, a poor little half-educated drudge, for she has been earning her own livelihood ever since she was fifteen. The father was a curate at St. Paul's; before he married again they were fairly comfortable; but a large young family drained his resources; he only died three years ago, and since then they have been terribly pinched. It really goes to my heart to see Gussie's shabby frocks. I used to give her a new gown now and then, and you should have seen

the poor girl's gratitude; but this year I have had nothing to spare for Gussie."

"I have a good idea," returned Elsie, who was very generous by nature. "Could I not give her one of my dresses? Holbrook has put in far too many; I shall never want them all, and I should not like Oliver to think me too extravagant, as he notices everything I wear. Shall I show you my dresses, Mrs. Romney? and then you can choose the one you think most suitable, and perhaps your maid could make it fit Miss Poole."

"You are a darling," returned Mrs. Romney, overjoyed at this proposition. "Now I come to think about it, Gussie is just your height, only she is much thinner. You will be a real fairy godmother, Elsie, and my poor Cinderella will be transformed. I should not be surprised if Gussie should look quite pretty, for she has an interesting little face."

"She must be made to believe that the dress is your present," returned Elsie, earnestly: "she could not accept a gift from a perfect stranger." And Mrs. Romney agreed to this.

It was not very easy to make the selection, but at last Mrs. Romney fixed on a dainty white frock trimmed with beautiful embroidery; it was far too good, she observed, but all Elsie's gowns were perfect; but it had one advantage over the others, that it would wash.

"I can spare that blue cotton as well," returned Elsie, magnanimously; "it is very pretty, and I bought it in Paris, but I can easily do without it. There is a hat that matches it. Do take it, Mrs. Romney. I can buy a dozen new gowns if I like, and Uncle George will only call me an extravagant puss. I should love Miss Poole to have them." And, after a great deal of persuasion, Mrs. Romney consented to avail herself of Elsie's generosity.

She mystified Oliver by calling Elsie the fairy godmother all the remainder of the day, though she refused to enlighten him about the origin of the title and teased him unmercifully about Gussie.

A letter was sent by hand to Draycott, and the servant brought back Gussie's reply. Mrs. Romney showed it to Elsie that evening:

"Dear, dear Mrs. Romney," wrote Gussie, "how good you are! I was quite miserable and hopeless when I woke this morning. I could not see the least little bit of comfort anywhere: things have been getting worse lately, and I have cried myself to sleep every night. When I showed your note to mamma, she made no objection to my coming; I dare say that in her heart she is glad to get rid of me for a day or two: so I will be quite ready for you to-morrow morning.

"Yours most gratefully and lovingly,

"GUSSIE."

CHAPTER IX.

A MODERN CINDERELLA.

Where's the cook? is supper ready, the house trimmed, rushes strewed, cobwebs swept?
Taming of the Shrew.

THE Squire asked Oliver to ride with him the next morning to see a new barn that had just been erected on the farm: so Mrs. Romney and Elsie went alone to Draycott.

Gussie was to be ready for them by twelve o'clock: so, as there was half an hour to spare, Mrs. Romney proposed that they should utilize the time by laying in a stock of stationery that was needed for household use.

Mrs. Romney had almost completed her purchases at the stationer's, and Elsie was amusing herself at the opposite counter by turning over some pictorial papers, when a young girl entered the shop and took up her position beside her.

Elsie was too much engrossed with the *Graphic* to notice her at first, until a remarkably sweet voice reached her ear, when she turned round and regarded her rather curiously; at the same moment Mrs. Romney rose hastily, and, after a few words spoken in a low tone to the man who was serving her, left the shop without taking any notice of Elsie.

The girl was shabbily dressed in a pink cotton that was evidently outgrown and had been frequently washed. She looked about fourteen, though she was rather tall for that age, and her face was thin and singularly careworn. She had soft, pathetic-looking blue eyes, and a long plait of fair hair fell to her waist. She looked at Elsie in a shy admiring way; probably she had never seen such a dainty little person before; then she gave her attention to a book she was selecting.

"We have had that already. Will you please show me something else?—one of Trollope's or Kingsley's will do——" but at this moment Elsie missed Mrs. Romney.

"Mrs. Carfax is outside," observed the shopman, noticing her surprise, and Elsie found her inspecting some childish garments in the window of the baby-linen shop.

"Do you think those pinafores pretty?" she asked, as Elsie joined her. "Would they do for Harry? Do you mind going in and asking the price while I go back for a moment? I have forgotten something. Get Mrs. Julius to show you her stock, and I will be with you in a moment."

Elsie did as she was bid; the pinafores were very pretty, and she put aside three for Mrs. Romney's inspection; but more than ten minutes elapsed before Mrs. Romney made her appearance. Elsie went to the door once to see if she were coming; to her surprise, she was standing on the pavement talking to the girl in the pink cotton. When she saw Elsie she left off talking, and joined her at once.

"Have I been long?" she said, hurriedly. "I am so sorry to keep you, Elsie, and we shall be late for Gussie. Let me see those pinafores. Yes, they will do very nicely. Please put them up, Mrs. Julius, and we will take them with us."

"Who was that girl?" asked Elsie, rather inquisitively.

"Oh, she is a young *protégée* of mine," returned Mrs. Romney, carelessly. "I have plenty of friends in Draycott," and her tone somehow made Elsie feel that she had been too curious. The next moment she recollected the Squire's speech "about the overgrown child in pink cotton." It must be the same girl that Mr. Lockhart had seen yesterday.

Mrs. Romney was rather quiet until they reached their destination, a small uninviting house, with an untidy garden. As the wagonette stopped, the door opened, and a rough-looking maid-of-all-work brought out a shabby brown portmanteau; a young lady followed her, whom Mrs. Romney welcomed very kindly.

"Jump in, Gussie, or we shall be late for luncheon. This is my little sister-in-law to be,—Elsie Vaughan; she and I are great friends already.—Elsie, I have told you all about Gussie, so you need not treat her as a stranger; we must all be as merry as possible."

"I am very glad to see you, Miss Vaughan," returned Gussie, shyly. What a radiant young princess she looked to Gussie, sitting opposite to her in her shabby brown gown! but Elsie regarded her very kindly.

Miss Poole was certainly a plain little person, she thought, and that old brown frock was hideous; but she had nice eyes, and gentle unassuming manners, and there was something very natural and artless about her; it would not be difficult to get fond of her, she was sure of that.

"I nearly cried with joy when I read your letter," Gussie was saying. "Three whole days at the Frythe with you and dear Lady Carfax and Harry—ah! how happy I shall be!" And a soft color came into the thin girlish cheeks that had lost their roundness.

"And my husband,—you have not forgotten my husband, Gussie?"

"No, indeed," in Gussie's most impressive voice. "Mr. Carfax is always so kind to me; but I am rather afraid of him; he is so grand-looking and splendid altogether that I never know what to say to him." And Mrs. Romney laughed at this.

"Oh, we all know how you admire the Squire; but really, Gussie, you must try and get over your awe of menkind.—She is afraid of Oliver too, Elsie; she is as quiet as a mouse when either of them is in the room, and yet she will chatter to me and Gran for the hour together.—We are all going out to dinner to-night, Gussie," she continued, "and I shall take you under my wing. I have told you about Mr. Lockhart, what a good little man he is. I don't believe Rab was ever out of temper in his life, and he does the kindest and most generous actions; he is not handsome, certainly, but he is as good as gold."

As Mrs. Romney made this laudatory speech, a shade passed over Gussie's face, and a distressed look came into her eyes.

"You are very kind, dear Mrs. Romney," she stammered, "and I should dearly love to go with you, it is so long since I have been to a real party, but—but—" and now there were actual tears in the poor girl's eyes, "you had better leave me behind. I should only disgrace you. I have nothing proper to wear."

"Tut! nonsense!" returned Mrs. Romney, vigorously. "Did you ever hear of Cinderella and the fairy godmother? Just wait a little. I am going to bring out a fresh edition of the dear old tale. I am going to play the part of fairy godmother myself, and you shall be turned into a real princess." And as Gussie looked at her with puzzled eyes, she patted her on the shoulder, and told her to be patient, like a good girl.

Two hours afterwards, as Elsie was swinging lazily in a hammock under the elm-trees, Gussie came in search of her, to tell her a most wonderful piece of news.

"Oh, Miss Vaughan," she burst out, and her cheeks were burning with excitement, "did you ever hear of such kindness!" And thereupon Gussie related to her amused auditor how Mrs. Romney had taken her into her room, and shown her the loveliest and daintiest of gowns that she was to wear to-night, and not only that,—and Gussie's eyes looked twice their ordinary size,—but there were such a beautiful blue dress and hat, prettier than any that she had ever seen in her life, which Mrs. Romney had told her that she was to wear at the tennis-party the following afternoon, "and she was quite angry with me when I could not help crying over such kindness," finished Gussie, little dreaming that the real benefactor was rocking herself to and fro in the hammock before her.

"Little Miss Poole looks dowdier than ever," observed the Squire, when he joined his wife in the drawing-room. "Upon my word, Kitty, you are not showing your usual tact and sense. Fancy putting that pale washed-out little creature in her shabby frock beside Elsie Vaughan! I saw Elsie just now, and she looked perfectly charming. Rab, with all his good nature, will never look twice at Miss Poole."

"Rab is far too much of a gentleman to neglect any of his guests," returned Mrs. Romney, tranquilly.—"So you are ready, Gussie, my dear?" as the door opened, and a slim white figure hesitated on the threshold. Gussie in her humility hardly knew how to comport herself in her new finery.

The Squire checked an exclamation with difficulty; then he coughed slightly and rearranged his button-hole bouquet. This smooth-haired little girl with smiling eyes, who was dressed so prettily, could not be Miss Poole! Cinderella transformed into the princess was hardly a more startling transformation than the poor little governess in her shabby brown frock, changed into this well-dressed young lady.

Gussie's blushes were wonderfully becoming: her little white throat swelled with innocent pride; if only her step-mother could have seen her, and Laura and Connie and the boys, they would not have called her Muff then, the *sobriquet* by which Gussie was known at home.

"Miss Vaughan quite started when she saw me," whispered Gussie to her friend. "Dear, dear Mrs. Romney, how happy you have made me! I know I shall enjoy myself this evening."

"I have taken the liberty of bringing a friend who is staying with me," observed Mrs. Romney, when Rab met them at the door. "You have never seen Miss Poole before." And the little man rubbed his hands and looked excessively pleased.

"The more the merrier, eh, Squire? I am delighted to see you at The Hut, Miss Poole." And Mr. Lockhart beamed all over, while Gussie blushed very prettily. No one had ever blushed before when Rab made his little speeches, and Rab positively thrilled with satisfaction as Gussie looked at him with gentle plaintive eyes.

"You are very kind," she faltered, and as Rab ushered them into the drawing-room and went off in search of Mrs. Brattle he felt two inches taller.

"What a beautiful room!" whispered Gussie as she followed Mrs. Romney into a recess, while the Squire, who had grown wary by experience, piloted Elsie round corners and between cabinets until he reached a massive oak settle, when he seated himself with a sigh of relief. Elsie glanced round her curiously, but she did not echo Gussie's speech: to her the low, quaintly-shaped room was overcrowded with furniture,—Chippendale chairs and tables, carved cabinets loaded perilously with old china, lamps, clocks, pictures on easels, blocking up all available space.

"When I once take my seat," observed the Squire, solemnly, "I never move, on principle. I broke a valuable china dish last time I was here; and the time before I knocked over an easel. How any man can live in such a heap of furniture passes my comprehension. Ah, there goes the gong, and here is our host. I have got to take you in to dinner, Elsie. You must not take my arm: it would be dangerous: follow me closely, and I will get you safely out of the room."

The Squire always took the foot of the table on these occasions, and Elsie sat by him. Gussie, as the stranger, found herself placed on the left hand of her host. She was very shy at first, and talked in monosyllables. Rab in his evening attire with diamond studs, and a flashing ring on his little finger, seemed very grand and formidable in Gussie's eyes, but before dinner was over she was chatting to him in her usual artless way.

Rab was rather curious about his new guest: he plied her with questions,—if she lived in Draycott why had they not met before? he was positive that he had never seen her; where had she hidden herself all this time? and then Gussie with many blushes avowed that she had seen Mr. Lockhart more than once; did he not drive into Draycott in a dog-cart with a beautiful bay mare? Oh, yes, he had passed her more than once as she went to her teaching; did not Mr. Lockhart know that she was a governess,—the daily governess? had not Mrs. Romney told him? And Gussie grew crimson, as though she had been detected in a fault.

Before the evening was out, Rab knew all about Gussie's troubles,—the hard, bitter-tempered step-mother and the mischievous unruly brothers and sisters. "They call her Muff, and tease her most unmercifully, and she is so good to them. Gussie has the sweetest nature; she is the most heroic little creature," continued Mrs. Romney, weaving her harmless little web round clumsy slow-witted Rab. "You must ask her to sing. No, I have not brought any songs to-night; I have left them to the girls." But, as Elsie could not be found, Oliver having decoyed her out into the garden, Gussie sang one song after

another, in a fresh, sweet little voice, that went straight to Rab's heart.

Naughty Arachne got him into her corner again while Elsie and Gussie were putting on their hats.

"We have had a delightful evening. You have been very kind and attentive to poor little Miss Poole, Rab, and I assure you your kindness will not be thrown away. Gussie thinks everything beautiful: she told me just now that Mr. Lockhart had such taste, and that she was sure he was very clever to have so many books. You may be sure that I did not undeceive her. I dare say she thinks that you have read them all. Gussie is such a dear, simple child, and believes everything. Do you think her pretty, Rab? Of course she is not as pretty as Elsie, but she has a nice little face. If Gussie were only happy, and had the chances of other girls, a good, kind husband to take care of her——Oh, are you ready, girls? Please don't wait for me. Rab will walk across with me. You may stay with me, if you like, Gussie, unless you prefer to go with my husband." And, as Gussie chose to remain with her friend, the three walked home very happily in the moonlight.

"Well, Gussie, have you enjoyed yourself? Have you had a happy evening? Poor Mr. Lockhart makes a capital host, does he not? But it is very sad to see that pretty little house without a mistress."

"Why does not Mr. Lockhart marry?" asked Gussie, bashfully, and Mrs. Romney returned an evasive answer: not for worlds would she tell the girl that to her knowledge Rab had made fruitless offers to more than five ladies. She questioned Gussie skilfully, and elicited the fact that Rab was not plain in Gussie's eyes. "He is not handsome," continued Gussie, innocently, "but I think he is very pleasant-looking, and he has so much expression." And Mrs. Romney retailed this speech to the much-flattered Rab: evidently prominent light-blue eyes were quite to Gussie's taste, and hence it was a foregone conclusion in Mrs. Romney's opinion.

CHAPTER X.

ELSIE'S POSY.

When the sea is calm, all boats alike
Show mastership in floating.
Coriolanus.

THERE was a large garden-party at the Frythe the next afternoon. It was given in Elsie's honor, and people came from a distance to inspect the young heiress: in his friends' opinion Captain Carfax had done remarkably well for himself, and he was making a far better match than his brother had done. Mrs. Romney was a charming woman, but no one knew anything about her people: gossip reported that she had been a governess, and that her poverty had been so great that even her wedding outfit had been paid for by the Squire.

Happily unconscious of these remarks, Mrs. Romney received her guests with her usual large-hearted hospitality. The Squire, who was

very sociable by nature, dearly loved to gather his friends and neighbors round him on every possible occasion, and it was his wife's delight to carry out his wishes. She was an excellent manager, and the dinners and other entertainments at the Frythe were always admirably arranged. Mrs. Romney was an ideal hostess; she was so full of life and spirits, so anxious that her guests should enjoy themselves and feel at home, that no one could feel neglected or out in the cold.

The Squire was a genial host, but he was not equal to his wife; he preferred to talk to his special cronies or to get into snug corners with a favorite guest and admire his wife's graceful figure as she flitted from one group to another. "Look at her," he said once to his mother: "she finds something to say to every one. She is not even bored by that deaf old Lady Martin. Catherine is so human; she declares she likes everybody, and upon my word I believe she does: Jews, Turks, Infidels, she would have a kind speech for them all. I call her my Lady Bountiful sometimes, and the name just fits her." "Well, Kitty," catching hold of her as she was about to pass him with a smile, "what are you after now? You will wear yourself out trying to be in a dozen places at once."

"Please do not keep me, dear," with an anxious glance at a knot of people in the centre of the lawn: "we are going to get up a game of croquet for the elderly people,—married *versus* single,—and I am looking all over the place for old Miss Davison. Have you seen her, Romney?" enforcing her question with an impatient little shake of his arm. "What are you looking at?" petulantly, as he regarded her with tender amusement. "Something is wrong with my dress: I have torn some lace, I suppose?"

"There is nothing the matter with your dress, my Lady Bountiful," returned the Squire. "Don't ask me to go after old Miss Davison: I detest her. She was in the tea-tent five minutes ago." "There, she is off; did you ever see such a piece of quicksilver, mother? Now she has gone to say pretty things to that spiteful old woman, and I have reason to know," dropping his voice and looking cautiously round him, "that she is the little bird who makes all those nasty remarks about Catherine."

"It is a fine gathering. Most of our friends are here," he remarked, complacently, as he and Elsie walked down the lawn later on, after a most exciting set of tennis: Oliver and a certain Miss Waldegrave had been their opponents, and the Squire and Elsie had won. "Catherine said we had better have a large affair while we were about it; and she was right, as usual. We got the band over from Draycott,—a good band always fetches people,—and I should not be surprised if the young people begin dancing presently. Is it not an animated scene,—all those gay dresses, and the tents, and the beds of flowers?"

"It is very pretty," returned Elsie, dreamily. "Look at that boatful of children on the lake, and the swans gliding in their wake, and those dear little things dancing under the trees. Every one looks so happy. Ah! there is little Miss Poole sitting under the acacia with Mr. Lockhart."

"By Jove, yes, and they have been playing three sets: upon my word, Rab is going it."

"Miss Poole is not a good player," returned Elsie, demurely, "but Mr. Lockhart does not seem to mind. I heard him comforting her just now: he was telling her that she only wanted practice and assurance. It was so amusing to hear him; and Miss Poole was so humble and grateful."

"Elsie, we want you to make up another set," observed Oliver, who now joined them. But Elsie demurred: she was tired; she had been playing most of the afternoon; Oliver must find another partner; she would sit down in the shade and rest herself. No, the Squire need not stay with her; she did not mind being alone.

"I don't care about playing myself," was Oliver's reply. "Suppose you take my place, Romney. I will just hunt up Miss Waldegrave,—she was sitting in the veranda,—and then I will come back to you, Elsie." But Elsie pretended not to hear this, and when they were out of sight she got up and strolled down a secluded shrubbery path that led to the gate. She was tired and over-excited, and longed for a few minutes' solitude. Oliver would soon find her. She was weary of listening to pretty speeches, of feeling herself the cynosure of all eyes. It was delicious to find herself alone with the birds who were twittering round her: the music sounded better when it was softened by the distance. And here Elsie's musings were suddenly checked. She had heard no footstep,—not even the rustle of a dress,—but a turn in the shrubbery brought her face to face with a young girl. Elsie's startled exclamation was faintly re-echoed, and the girl pressed nervously against the hedge. She stammered a sort of frightened apology to Elsie.

"The gate was open, and I walked up the path a little way to listen to the music: it sounded so beautiful, and no one stopped me. I meant no harm."

"You are not one of the guests, then? No, of course not," with a glance at the shabby pink cotton. Elsie's quick eyes had recognized her at once: it was the same young girl who had been choosing books at the library: there was no mistaking the thin, anxious face and the large, wistful blue eyes. She was Mrs. Romney's *protégée*.

"You are doing no harm at all," she went on, with sudden animation. "If you come with me a little farther up this path you will have a view of the house and lawn. No one will see you," as the girl shrunk back in manifest alarm, "and it is such a pretty sight: the children are dancing under the trees, and the lawn is covered with people: you can just peep through the bushes and see it all."

"Are you sure no one will see me?" returned the girl, anxiously, and Elsie again noticed the sweetness of her voice. "I do want to see it all dreadfully,—the lake, and the house,—but I am afraid that I am doing wrong."

"What nonsense!" returned Elsie, with peremptory good nature. "Come with me; I am staying in the house, so no one will question us; the view is only a few yards farther: there is a break in the bushes, and you can see everything." And the girl allowed herself to be persuaded.

She followed Elsie closely, almost holding her breath, as she stole after her with noiseless footsteps. When they had gained their hiding-place, she stood beside her as though she were riveted to the spot.

"How beautiful!" she murmured, presently. "It is far more beautiful than I thought. That lovely lake, and the trees dipping their branches into the water, and that long veranda with all those climbing roses, and all those windows shining like gold. What a great house! And then all those fine people, so grandly dressed! It is like a picture."

"I knew you would be pleased," returned Elsie, in a friendly voice. "The Frythe is a very nice old-fashioned house, but I do not call it grand."

"It seems so to me; but perhaps you are used to fine houses." And here the girl looked at her shyly. This beautifully-dressed young lady was very kind to her, but Elsie only laughed, and played with the flowers in her hand: she carried a posy of loosely-tied roses that Oliver had given her, and that harmonized with her dress.

"You are pulling that lovely rose to pieces!" exclaimed the girl, in a distressed tone. "I am so fond of flowers, and——"

"Eva! what on earth are you doing here?" asked a reproachful voice beside them, and both girls started violently. Mrs. Romney was standing in the path with a perturbed look in her eyes; the girl turned perceptibly paler.

"I only walked a little way up the path to listen to the music," she faltered. "I am very sorry. I meant no harm."

"You must not be angry with her," interposed Elsie, for she thought Mrs. Romney's manner was unnecessarily stern, and the poor child looked terribly frightened. "She was only just inside the gate, and I brought her here to have a peep at the gay scene. She has done no harm at all." But Mrs. Romney's displeasure was not lessened.

"You promised me never to come near the place, Eva," was her severe answer. "You have broken your word. How can I trust you again?" But here the poor girl burst into tears.

"I only wanted to see it once; I——"

"Never mind," returned Mrs. Romney, hastily; "you must go now, and I will talk to you another time." And she put her hand on her arm to enforce her words, but Elsie pushed by her.

"There, you shall have my flowers. Please do not cry; you have done nothing wrong. Mrs. Romney has no right to be so hard with you."

"Go away, Elsie, and leave me to manage my own business." But Mrs. Romney's good humor had returned. "Come, Eva, I will walk with you to the gate: quick, or I shall be missed." Elsie hesitated for a moment, and then she followed them more slowly. "I may as well wait for Mrs. Romney," she said to herself, but before she had gone many yards she changed her mind. Mrs. Romney might be vexed with her: she might consider herself watched. She was about to retrace her steps, when she saw Mrs. Romney stop and put her arms round the girl. "Don't do it again," she heard her say. "No, I am not really angry with you; it was thoughtless, but I forgive you;"

and as she spoke Elsie saw her pass a caressing hand down the fair plait of hair. Elsie turned away quickly, and the next minute she met Oliver.

"So I have caught my bird at last," he said, drawing her hand through his arm. "You wanted to escape me, or you would never have taken refuge in these damp shrubberies: no one ever walks in them. Now I am going to punish you for daring to play me such a trick. Why," with a sudden change of tone, "you have dropped your roses, Elsie. I will go back and look for them." But Elsie stopped him.

"Oh, I am so sorry! I ought not to have done it. I have given away your flowers, Oliver." And then Oliver did look a little surprised.

"I did not want to part with them, and they were so lovely," continued Elsie, apologetically, "but I was so sorry for the poor girl, and Mrs. Romney was so hard on her."

"What girl? Have you been talking to any one?" asked Oliver, with sudden suspicion; and then Elsie related what had happened. Oliver listened silently until she had finished.

"I am glad you gave her the flowers, darling; it was a kind thought; but I am going to ask you not to mention this little occurrence to my mother or Romney. Mrs. Romney is peculiar, and likes to keep her *protégées* to herself; she is very generous, and you can understand——" But here Oliver found it difficult to finish his sentence.

"I never meant to tell any one but you, Oliver. I thought I ought to tell you everything." And this reply was so sweet in Captain Carfax's ear that he changed the whole subject abruptly, and Elsie ceased to regret her impulsive generosity when she found Oliver did not mind.

As they were crossing the lawn to the house a few minutes afterwards, they came upon Mrs. Romney. She was organizing a set of Lancers, and seemed full of animation. She flushed for a moment when she saw Elsie. Then she addressed Oliver. "You must be my partner," she said, with peremptory playfulness. "Romney declares I must open the ball and set the young people an example. Will you spare him to me, Elsie?" And Elsie nodded assent.

She seated herself on one of the benches, and watched them. It struck her that between the figures they talked rather gravely together. By and by Oliver relapsed into his old languid manner, but Mrs. Romney looked hot and tired, and her animation seemed gone. She sat down beside Elsie when the dance was over. "Oliver has not been a bit nice to me," she remarked, rather querulously. "Do you think one's brother-in-law has a right to lecture one? Oliver is always scolding me now, and I find it depressing. I like people to be pleased with me." And Mrs. Romney's eyes looked a little plaintive.

The next moment Gussie and Mr. Lockhart came up to them. Gussie's gentle little mouse-like face was beaming with happiness. Rab looked like a boy who was thoroughly enjoying his holiday.

"Have you had a good time?" asked Mrs. Romney, in a sympa-

thetic voice, and then she added, mischievously, "I heard some one admiring your frock just now. It is certainly one of the prettiest here. You must have a good dress-maker, Gussie." And this speech covered Gussie with confusion.

"Dear Mrs. Romney, how can you?" she said, helplessly, and then her eyes began to brighten. "Ah! I have had such a lovely time! I have never enjoyed myself so much in my life. And Mr. Lockhart has been so kind, he did not mind all my stupid mistakes at tennis."

"Miss Poole only needs assurance," returned Rab, gallantly. "By the bye, Mrs. Romney, we witnessed a very pretty little scene just now. Who was that young lady whom you were consoling so kindly down by the gate? She seemed in trouble, poor thing!"

"I suppose you mean a poor little girl whom I know slightly," returned Mrs. Romney, carelessly. "Ah, here comes my husband: I am afraid I must run away." But Mr. Lockhart detained her:

"I suppose she lives in Draycott: I seem always meeting her: she has fair hair, which she wears in a childish fashion, and she is generally dressed in an old pink frock. I followed her to Church Street once, and——"

"Were you looking for me, Romney? I suppose some of the people are going." And Mrs. Romney took her husband's arm.

"Wait a moment, Kitty: there is no hurry. I want to speak to Rab first." And Mrs. Romney made a little gesture of impatience.

"They were your flowers, Miss Vaughan," Rab was saying, a little pertinaciously; "I could swear to them,—a posy of tea-roses, tied with a gold-colored ribbon."

"Have you lost your flowers, Elsie?" asked the Squire, with surprise, but Mrs. Romney did not wait for her answer.

"What a fuss you are making, Mr. Lockhart!" she said, irritably. "It is very simple. Elsie gave her flowers to a poor girl in whom I am interested; it was very sweet of her, but she certainly did not intend her kindness to be made public.—Don't you hate to hear your good deeds flaunted before your face, Elsie? I agree with the French saying, 'Defend me from my friends; I can defend myself from my enemies.'" And Mrs. Romney's tone was a little haughty.

"I don't understand Mrs. Romney as well as I used," confided Rab to his companion presently: "she is uncertain,—very uncertain." But Gussie's loyalty refused to admit this; Mrs. Romney was simply perfect in her eyes.

"She is the dear—the dearest friend I ever had. No one has ever shown me so much kindness. There is nothing that I would not do for her," finished Gussie, with tremulous zeal. To do Gussie justice, she never changed this opinion of her early friend, and in future days young Mrs. Rab Lockhart often declared to her delighted husband that she owed the happiness of her life to her dear Mrs. Romney. "For you would never have seen me, Rab," she would add, pathetically, "if she had not asked me to the Frythe, and to this day I should have been a poor little drudge of a daily governess if you had not made me the happiest woman in the world."

"Never was there a more suitable marriage," Mrs. Romney would

say to herself when she saw Gussie's beaming face. Rab's pride in his wife was intense; any one but Gussie would have been utterly spoiled; in his simple enthusiasm Rab changed the name of his house to The Dovecot, "for it is so much more expressive than The Hut," observed the little man, in a tone of supreme satisfaction.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DOOR IN THE SHRUBBERY.

> More water glideth by the mill
> Than wots the miller of.
> *Titus Andronicus.*

LATER on that evening Elsie sat out on the veranda enjoying the still fragrance of the night; behind her was the soft yellow glow of the lamps, and in front the lake shone fitfully under the starlight; and a row of tall white lilies glimmered faintly in the darkness.

Oliver had just left her in response to a summons from his brother, and a moment later Mrs. Romney stepped out on the veranda. As she stood in the circle of brightness Elsie thought she looked like a picture.

She wore a dress of soft amber silk, and her arms gleamed ivory-white under the quaintly-cut sleeves; a moment afterwards she raised them to her head with a childish gesture of weariness that was nevertheless full of grace, and then she sank into the hammock-chair that Oliver had just vacated. "Oh, how tired I am!" she murmured.

"No wonder you are tired," was Elsie's reply. "Oliver says you have done the work of half a dozen women to-day. It is late,—nearly eleven: why do you not go to bed?"

"I hate going to bed unless one is sure to sleep, and I should only lie awake for hours. What an awfully complex thing life is, after all!"

"To me it seems perfectly simple," returned Elsie, cheerfully.

"To you!" with a low laugh: "you innocent little creature, what do you know of life? I was envying you this afternoon, Elsie: you looked like a happy child who had no past."

"Do you mean that you would change places with me?"

"No, indeed!" And, in spite of her fatigue, Mrs. Romney's tone was full of energy. "With all my difficulties, I would not change places with any living woman. Do you suppose that Oliver, with all his goodness, can hold a candle to my Romney? Elsie, have you any idea what he has done for me?" And here her manner changed, and her voice was full of emotion. "He brought happiness into my life, and before I knew him it was full of care."

"Were you so very poor then?" asked Elsie, a little curiously; but Mrs. Romney did not seem to resent the question.

"Yes, horribly poor. If I were not as shabby as Gussie, it was only that my self-respect would not permit me to be shabby. I was too proud to allow my poverty to appear. I would rather have sat up all night to turn an old gown than wear it until it became an eyesore.

Romney told me once soon after we were engaged that I always dressed so well; how I laughed to hear him! and yet I could have cried, too, to think of all my miserable little shifts. Do you know, Elsie, that my husband was obliged to pay for my wedding outfit? Most people would be ashamed to own that; but, with all my pride, I am not a bit ashamed. I delight to owe everything to him." And the glow of feeling on Mrs. Romney's face made her positively beautiful.

"I wonder if I could ever feel like that," murmured Elsie, half to herself, but Mrs. Romney heard her.

"No, don't wonder; we are very different people, and our circumstances are too dissimilar for comparisons. Besides, comparisons are odious things. My life has been an ordeal, and yours has rippled on as smoothly as a little brook. I read once in some book that there were no such things as conflicting duties; that the term was an anomaly,—almost an impossibility; but I differ from this; it seems to me that most of the misery of life comes from the effort to reconcile conflicting duties."

"Oliver would disagree with you there," began Elsie, but Mrs. Romney interrupted her almost impatiently:

"Please don't quote Oliver; he is a severe critic; he has such terribly hard-and-fast rules: he declares a well-balanced mind can always discern the right path, that there can be but one right and one wrong, and that it is the endeavor to act Providence that so often leads us astray."

"I almost think Oliver is right."

"He is right in a way, but he does not discriminate. Elsie, I am afraid I shall shock your innocence, but do you think it is possible to be true—absolutely true—in this world?"

"Most certainly I do." And Elsie's tone was somewhat distressed.

"That shows your simplicity, child. I do not want to shock you; I have never told a lie—a real lie—in my life, and I hope that I never shall, but all the same one has to act it sometimes."

"No, no."

"I tell you yes; and then it is not possible to be always strictly accurate. I saw you were a little surprised this afternoon when I told Rab that I knew that child slightly. I am very quick, and I could see from your manner that you thought I was misleading him; but he had no right to be so inquisitive. I was merely on the defensive against unwarrantable curiosity."

"I can understand that."

"Oh, but you thought me hard to her; but you cannot judge, Elsie. I have been very kind to her; I was her best friend, but she was wrong to disobey me. I never allow my *protégées* or pensioners to come to the house; it is really my mother-in-law's house: all my good deeds are done by stealth. She ought to have respected my wishes."

"She is very young," pleaded Elsie.

"She is nearly fifteen, and circumstances should have made her older than she is, but she is lamentably childish: she is a tender plant that needs sunshine to thrive." And here she sighed, and then abruptly changed the subject; but a little later, when Elsie was bidding her

good-night, she looked at her rather pathetically. "Don't distrust me if you can help it, dear. I try to be as good as I can, and I never want to do wrong." And then she gave an odd little laugh and left her.

Two or three days passed. Gussie had gone back to her home, on the understanding that the visit was shortly to be repeated, and Elsie and Oliver spent their time riding about the country or playing tennis with their neighbors.

One wet afternoon they had betaken themselves to the billiard-room for amusement, and had indulged afterwards in a game of shuttlecock and battledoor, in which Mrs. Romney had joined them; and Sir Henry had had his chair wheeled into the corridor, that he might watch the players.

The rain ceased towards evening, and after dinner they all gathered in the veranda while Mrs. Romney sang to them.

By and by the Squire strolled off to his smoking-room, and Oliver went in search of a book he was reading. Elsie, left to herself, went down the veranda step and sauntered aimlessly down one of the paths. The clouds had broken, and a faint watery moon just showed itself; the air was sweet with the scent of lilies, and Elsie was enjoying the freshness, when she suddenly started: a dark figure had glided from the bushes and crossed her path; but the next moment her courage returned: it was a woman, probably one of the servants who had been sent on some errand and was returning to the house, and she was about to pass her, when a gleam of fair hair caught her eyes, and in spite of the disguising waterproof she recognized the young girl whom Mrs. Romney had called Eva.

"Is it you?" she exclaimed, in some natural surprise. "Are you wanting to see any one?"

"Yes, please," in an eager whisper. "I must see Catherine—I mean Mrs. Romney. Would you bring her to me? Oh, I know," clasping her hands with a gesture of distress, "she was very angry when she saw me looking at the dancing the other day; she said I had no right to be here; but—but—I must speak to her. I have walked all this way in the rain to let her know."

"To let her know what? Don't be afraid: I will do anything I can to help you. But how wet you are!—dreadfully wet; and you look so tired! and, oh, dear, you have been crying!" for a sudden gleam of moonlight showed her the poor girl's swollen eyes; but the genuine kindness of Elsie's tone only set the tears flowing again.

"Please forgive me. I cannot help crying, I am so tired and miserable, and I want Catherine: please, please will you tell her when no one is near that I am here, and that I must speak to her? I have been here ever so long listening to her singing, and I could not help crying to think how sorry she would be if she knew I was standing outside in the wet."

"I will go to her at once. Don't fret any more. I will tell her not to be angry. But I hear footsteps: some one is looking for me." And the girl glided swiftly behind some shrubs.

"What are you doing, Elsie, in that damp place?" and Mrs. Rom-

ney's voice was somewhat sharp. "I heard voices. To whom were you talking?—Oh, Eva," with a start, as the girl, reassured, stepped out of her hiding-place. "How can you—how dare you try me in this way?"

"I could not help it, Catherine: you must not be angry; he is very ill, and I was so frightened that I was obliged to come to you. I thought he was dying, and——"

"Elsie, dear," and Mrs. Romney's voice was singularly agitated, "please go back to the house and try and find Oliver; tell him to come to the door in the shrubbery; he will find me there; but on no account let my husband know; he will be angry with me for exposing myself to this damp; but you see for yourself this poor child is in trouble, and I must help her,—I must."

Elsie ran back to the house at once, but, to her dismay, the Squire had reappeared with his cigar, and he and Oliver were having an argument in the veranda. Oliver gave her a nod, as much as to say, "Please do not interrupt us," but the Squire hardly noticed her.

What was to be done? They were in the heat of a political discussion: a remark had brought on the dispute: the Squire had his paper in his hand, and had just quoted a paragraph, and Oliver had retorted contemptuously that the statesman in question was an old woman and that his information was unreliable, and the Squire had fired up in a moment.

Elsie was in despair. Oliver was not generally dense, but the subject interested him, and he was slow to take her hints when she tried to attract his attention. He thought it was girlish coquetry, and only gave her an affectionate smile. She was quite at her wits' end to know what to do, until a happy idea came to her, and five minutes later Oliver found a folded slip of paper between his fingers: in the obscure light she had pushed it unnoticed into his hand.

This had the desired effect, and the next moment Oliver strolled to the window under the pretext of relighting his cigar. When he read Elsie's scrawl, his manner changed:

"Mrs. Romney wants to speak to you. She is by the door in the shrubbery. That girl is with her."

"I have got stiff with sitting. I think I will have a prowl," he observed, casually, when he rejoined them.

"I will take a turn with you," replied his brother, amiably, and Oliver and Elsie exchanged glances. Oliver raised his eyebrows: it was impossible to shake off the Squire when he was in a mood for argument. "There's no help for it," he muttered, as he went down the steps.

Elsie watched them until they were out of sight, and then she ran quickly down the shrubbery path: her footsteps were so light on the grass border that she reached them unperceived.

They were standing beside the half-open door that led into the road. Mrs. Romney's arms were round the girl, and Eva's face was hidden on her shoulder, and Mrs. Romney's voice was as tender as though she were speaking to her child:

"You must not lose courage, darling. Think what a comfort you are to me."

"But there is so little I can do," sobbed the girl. "All day long it is the same thing over and over again: 'Do you think Catherine will come?' 'I want Catherine!'—it breaks my heart to hear him."

"You are breaking mine when you tell me that. Dearest, there is nothing for us but patience.—Ah, Elsie," in a flurried tone, "how you startled me! Have you come to tell us that you cannot find Oliver?"

"Mr. Carfax is with him. I wrote your message on a bit of paper, but he cannot come just yet."

"Then there is only one thing to be done. You must go home, Eva, and trust me to do what I can for you. You will be brave, you will not be afraid," looking at the girl anxiously; but Eva recoiled with visible alarm at the sight of the dark road that lay beyond the gate.

"Oh, how dark it is! I am almost afraid to let go your hand, Catherine. Must I go all that way alone?"

"My darling, there is no help for it. Would I let you go alone if I could help it? But there is nothing to fear; these country roads are so safe. Pluck up your courage, dear; nothing will hurt you. I will stand here until you are safely round that dark corner and you can see the village. Walk out boldly: no one will speak to you."

"If I am frightened I shall run. Don't laugh at me, Catherine: I am not brave like you."

"I am not brave at all, my sweet," kissing her. "Now go, go, or my husband will hear us." She put her gently outside the gate, and stood there listening anxiously to the faltering, uneven footsteps. She had quite forgotten Elsie's existence. "Poor child!" she murmured to herself; "my poor frightened little Eva!" and she quite started when Elsie's voice sounded close to her.

"What does it all mean, Mrs. Romney? How fond you seem of that girl!"

"Yes, I am fond of her," she answered, rather shortly. "I love all young helpless things, and Eva is so terribly sensitive: she had a bad illness once, and a fright, and her nerves have never recovered it. Now help me to regain the house without my husband discovering me, or I shall be lectured severely for my imprudence." But, though Mrs. Romney tried to laugh, there was no mirth in her voice, and the laugh ended in a long-drawn sigh.

CHAPTER XII.

"WILL YOU DO ME A FAVOR?"

What, what, what! ill luck, ill luck!
Merchant of Venice.

ELSIE returned to her room that night in a sorely perplexed frame of mind.

In spite of her youth and ignorance of the world, she could no longer shut her eyes to the fact that some strange secret was connected with the mysterious visit of this young girl, and that notwithstanding Mrs. Romney's seeming frankness she was not acting in a perfectly

straightforward manner. Eva was no ordinary *protégée*, no mere recipient of a large-hearted bounty, Elsie was quite sure of that: the passionate tenderness of Mrs. Romney's tones still rang in her ears: "You must not lose courage, darling! think what a comfort you are to me!" and again, "Poor child! my poor frightened little Eva!" Why was she so anxious to shield her from her husband's notice? what could all this secrecy mean? and why was Oliver her confidant? It was this latter point that troubled her. Oliver was surely the last person in the world to give his sanction or countenance to any unworthy concealment; in her heart Elsie knew that she could trust him blindly, but all the same the mystery fretted and baffled her.

It was no use going to bed; she was far too wide awake. For a long time she waited, hoping that Mrs. Romney would come to her and offer some sort of explanation for her extraordinary behavior; but more than an hour passed and she gave no sign. She tried to read, but the least sound attracted her attention and made her lay down the book. Why was Oliver sitting up so late? he generally went to bed long before this. She could hear the Squire going his rounds, and then footsteps passed her door; to her relief, Oliver was with him: she could distinctly hear his voice, lowered purposely so as not to disturb her.

"Good-night, old fellow; pleasant dreams to you;" but the Squire's reply was not audible.

Elsie took the book again: she was not sleepy yet, and she might as well finish the chapter; it proved interesting, and she read another, and then she gave a sudden start; footsteps were passing her door again, the door opposite unclosed softly. A sudden overwhelming curiosity made Elsie open hers, and the subdued sound of voices reached her ear. Who could be talking at this late hour? Was Harry ill, and had his nurse summoned Mrs. Romney? This thought made Elsie venture out into the corridor, but the nursery door was fast shut, and the sound proceeded evidently from the staircase. The next moment she was peeping over the balustrade. To her intense chagrin, she saw Mrs. Romney, still in her evening dress, with a shawl thrown over her, talking to Oliver.

But it was Oliver's appearance that surprised her most. He had changed his clothes, and was in his light tweed morning suit, and his hat was in his hand. It was long past midnight, and yet he was going out. Elsie could bear no more, and, without stopping to consider what they would think of her, she ran noiselessly down the stairs. Mrs. Romney gave a faint shriek when she saw the little white figure flash suddenly into sight, but Oliver, with hardly a change of countenance, put out his hand to her. He looked grave and more impassive than ever.

"What is the matter?" asked Elsie, breathlessly. "Why are you going out? Is any one ill?" and then, as Oliver did not at once reply, she turned to Mrs. Romney a little angrily: "Why are you sending him out? It is your fault. You are always making him do things, and he does not like it."

"Why should you interfere, Elsie? You will spoil everything. Go to bed, like a good girl, and leave me to manage my own business.

Oliver is doing me a great kindness: he is a dear good fellow." Mrs. Romney spoke excitedly, but there was no temper in her tone: she was putting Elsie off as though she were a child, and the girl resented it.

"It is cruel of you to send him out in the middle of the night! What is the reason of all this mystery?—Oliver, why don't you answer me? I have a right to know. You are not treating me well, you and Mrs. Romney."

"No, darling, we are not, and you have every right to reprove us." And Oliver tightened his hold of the little hands, and looked at her quietly.—"Catherine, you are making trouble between me and Elsie with these foolish mysteries: you are risking not only your own peace, but ours. Let me put a stop to it by telling her the truth."

"Not to-night! oh, no, Oliver! I have your promise, and I cannot release you to-night! If Elsie loves you she will trust you. Why are you wasting time with all this nonsense? At any moment Romney may wake and miss me." And she almost wrung her hands with impatience.

"You hear what Catherine says, Elsie: she will not allow me to clear myself." But Elsie, touched to the heart by the suppressed pain of his voice, interrupted him:

"Don't look so troubled, Oliver. It is not your fault; I am sure of that. Nothing shall make mischief between us. I trust you; I know you are true as steel. There, go, go, if you must." And she was turning away, but he caught her almost passionately in his arms.

"I will never forget this! Thanks a thousand times, my darling, my loyal darling!—Come and let me out at the conservatory door, Catherine, and let me get this business over.—Go back to your room, Elsie, and sleep as sweetly as you deserve to sleep."

Elsie retraced her steps, and went swiftly to her window: it overlooked the path that led from the conservatory. The next moment Oliver passed, and waved his hand in recognition, but he did not speak. She stood there for a few moments lost in thought, until the sound of her own door opening made her turn her head as Mrs. Romney came hurriedly into the room. She looked pale and worried, and spoke in a hesitating manner:

"I am very sorry, Elsie. I would not pain you or Oliver for worlds, but I cannot help myself to-night. You were very dear and good to him, and he has gone off quite happily. You are a generous-hearted girl."

Elsie drew up her white chin a little proudly.

"Nothing can make me distrust Oliver," she said, coldly.

Mrs. Romney looked at her rather sadly.

"No, you only distrust me; you think I have no right to have secrets from my husband. Ah, you cannot judge. One day perhaps you will be more lenient. I cannot stop now, Elsie; Romney may wake any minute. He thinks I am with Harry; the child was a little feverish to-night, so I told him I should not undress yet. I wish you could have said something kind to me: my heart is heavy enough as it is." And here she suddenly broke down and sobbed in a distressing

manner. "Oh, my poor head!" she said, "my poor tired head!" and she laid it against the dressing-table.

This sudden loss of self-control frightened Elsie, and, forgetting her own grievances, she knelt down by Mrs. Romney and begged her to be calm, and in a few minutes she raised her head and began drying her eyes.

"No, it is no use crying; nothing can relieve me to-night. I have a dead weight here, Elsie," touching her chest, "a sickening dead weight, and it hurts me. Things are coming to a crisis, and I shall be undone. I have done no wrong in my Maker's eyes, but all the same I shall be undone. There, let me go: you are very kind, but it is impossible for you to help me. If it were not for Oliver I should go mad."

"I am very sorry for you," returned Elsie, mechanically; but Mrs. Romney made no answer: she stood for a moment with the shawl dropping from her shoulders and leaving her white neck uncovered, so that Elsie could see the piteous quivering in the muscles of the throat. Then she turned silently to the door, opened and then closed it noiselessly, and Elsie was left alone. The air had become damp and chilly, and the candles were getting in the draught. Elsie hastily undressed, and extinguished them. She meant to lie awake and watch for Oliver's return, but before ten minutes had elapsed she was fast asleep, and only the maid's busy movements about her room roused her the next morning.

The first person she saw when she went down-stairs was Oliver. He came out of the conservatory with some roses, his usual morning offering to his young betrothed, and put them in her hand silently. Elsie looked at him rather anxiously: he seemed fagged and tired.

"Were you out long, Oliver?" she whispered.

"I have only just returned," was his reply. "Don't wait for me, Elsie: I must have my tub before breakfast. Mrs. Romney is in there," pointing to the dining-room; and he hurried off, to prevent further questions.

Mrs. Romney was sorting the letters at the side table. She beckoned quickly to Elsie. She looked as though she had not slept all night, and her voice spoke of some terrible strain. "Elsie, will you do me a favor? It is urgent. Think of something you need in Draycott, that you must have without fail, and ask me to drive you in. Hush! I hear Romney's voice." And she turned again to the letters.

"I must have some more yellow floss silk for my work, and I can only match it myself," returned Elsie, very naturally, as the Squire entered, but she stifled a sudden impatience as she spoke. More mysteries,—more underhand plans: she was growing weary of them. "I suppose one can match silks in Draycott?"

"Oh, dear, yes. I will drive you there as soon as I have given cook her orders."

"Eh, what? shopping again, Mrs. Kitty? Why should you fash yourself with driving into Draycott this hot morning? Elsie can go with me in the dog-cart. I have nothing on earth to do, and you have had a bad night with Harry."

"A drive will do me good, Romney," pleaded his wife,—"will it not, Elsie? There is nothing like fresh air for picking one up."

"That is what I always say," returned Elsie, quickly. "A good ride after a ball does one all the good in the world. I hope you will come with me, Mrs. Romney, for I want your advice about a smock for Harry; I have promised to make him one."

Mrs. Romney flashed a grateful look at her, and her hand trembled as she poured out the coffee. "I should like to come with you, dear," she said, gently; and the Squire, who was in a high good humor over his letters, only rallied her for her obstinacy and self-will, and the subject dropped until Oliver entered the room, when the Squire casually observed that the ladies were driving in to Draycott. Oliver fixed his eyes inquiringly on his sister-in-law, but she gave him a quick sign, and he asked no questions until he found himself alone with Elsie.

"Are you sure you do not mind, Elsie?"

"I mind very much," was her candid answer: "I hate the very name of Draycott; but Mrs. Romney begged me to do her this favor. Oh, I hope we shall not be long."

"I am afraid you will, poor little Elsie. You are being martyred between us. I never loved you as I did last night: I must tell you that now, darling." And Oliver managed to say a good deal more, until Elsie's cheek burnt with his praises, and she drove off blushing like a rose and quite oblivious of Mrs. Romney's harassed looks.

Neither of them felt any inclination for conversation, and not a word was spoken until the tower of St. Mary's came in sight, and then Mrs. Romney leaned forward in the wagonette and said, hurriedly,—

"I have asked Archer to put me down at the corner of Church Street. You can do your shopping without me, I know. Be as long as you can. Why not go to the library and order some new books? Do not come for me for at least an hour. I will join you as soon as I am ready."

Elsie nodded, and proceeded to carry out her instructions; but she never found it so difficult to while away an hour. She matched her silks, and then went to the library; then she discovered that she was hungry and would like a bun, and Archer had orders to drive her to the best confectioner's. She had provided herself with an ice and a Bath bun, when her enjoyment was marred by the entrance of Mr. Lockhart: he spied her at once, and a beaming smile came over his face.

"Well, this is luck!" he said, exultingly, as he shook hands. "I was looking out for you ladies. I called at the Frythe to see if I could do any errands for any one, and the Squire volunteered to drive in with me; he is at the club, reading the papers, but he told me to look out for the wagonette, as he means to drive back with you. What have you done with Mrs. Romney?"

"She has some business. I shall call for her presently," stammered Elsie. "When did you say the Squire would be ready for us?"

"Oh, in about a quarter of an hour. You are to drive to the club for him. By the bye, Miss Vaughan, I met Miss Poole in Hart Street," and here the little man's face became alarmingly pink; "she

looked like a ghost, and seemed as down as possible; that step-mother of hers had been bullying her. I suppose," clearing his throat with difficulty, "that Mrs. Romney has not invited her again to the Frythe; it would do her a world of good, I am quite sure of that."

"I will tell Mrs. Romney what you say: Miss Poole is a great favorite of hers, and she is always so sorry for her. She is a very nice girl. I like her very much." Elsie hardly knew what she said; she was dying to get rid of Mr. Lockhart, but the little man stuck to her pertinaciously. He plied her with questions; did she not think Miss Poole an exceedingly amiable person, intelligent too? oh, yes, he was quite sure that she was intelligent; she read Carlyle and Ruskin, and then she was devoted to poetry, and—well, he must confess he had a sneaking fancy for the old-fashioned poets himself,—Pope's "Rape of the Lock," for example, could anything be more racy and delightful than Belinda's toilet? He begged pardon; he feared he was delaying Miss Vaughan; for Elsie had at last risen in desperation.

"I must go. I shall be late," she said, hurriedly. "Please do not come with me, Mr. Lockhart." But Rab was not to be shunted in that way; he handed Elsie into the wagonette with elaborate politeness, and stood bareheaded on the pavement until he received her parting smile. Elsie could only hope that her direction to drive to Church Street was not overheard. She looked up at the market clock as they drove past: in six or seven minutes the Squire would be standing in front of the club, looking out for them. There was only one thing to do: she must go herself to No. 27 and warn Mrs. Romney; there was no other course open to her; and directly the wagonette stopped she let herself out and ran down the street.

The door was open. Elsie knocked softly, and then louder, but, to her surprise, no one came; and after a minute's irresolution she stepped into the narrow passage and peeped into the shabby little sitting-room. It was quite empty, and looked as though it had been unoccupied for weeks: the colored antimacassars hung in faultless folds; some smart-looking books were ranged at equal distances round the centre-table; no one seemed moving about the kitchen except a black cat, who mewed at Elsie in rather a dismal fashion, but a faint creaking overhead attracted her attention.

Elsie was at her wits' end; but at last, in desperation, she began to ascend the narrow steep flight of stairs. As she did so, the shabby frayed druggeting attracted her attention: the people who lived here must be dreadfully poor, she thought; but the next moment she gave a violent start. Mrs. Romney's voice sounded quite close to her: it proceeded from a room just opposite the staircase.

"Give me the wine, Eva: he is getting faint again. Oh, why, why does not Dr. Evans come? Father, father dear, you must drink this: it is Catherine who is giving it to you."

Elsie held her breath and crept to the door. That agonized voice made her shiver. Mrs. Romney's back was towards her: she was kneeling beside the bed, and supporting a gray-haired man in her arms. Elsie had a glimpse of the worn, emaciated features, then Eva's fair head obstructed her view.

"Drink it, daddy," she said, in a sobbing voice, but a wasted hand waved it away.

"It is poisoned," returned the invalid, in a hollow voice. "She said she would do for me. She is the curse of my life, and she is killing me slowly every day. Catherine," rousing up with fitful energy, "don't let her come here; hide me away from her. And hide Eva, too; she is cruel to Eva; I saw the bruises on the child's arm myself. When she drinks she is like a fury, and she hates us both."

"There is no one here, father, but Eva and your own Kitty. No one shall hurt you, never again, never again. 'He shall wipe the tears off from all faces,'—do you remember those words, dear? from yours,—from mine when in His good time I shall have earned my rest. See, I am tasting the wine, and it is good, for it comes from my husband's cellar. Now you will take it, like a dear good father, for your poor Catherine's sake."

"Mrs. Romney," Elsie's voice almost breathed into her ear, and Mrs. Romney's white face turned on her full of startled indignation.

"You here? How dare you intrude on my privacy?" Her voice was purposely lowered, but her gray eyes flashed with anger. The old man clutched her convulsively:

"Who is that, Catherine? Send her away. I will see no one."

"It is a friend, father," her voice melting into tenderness. "She has a good heart, and will not do us any harm.—Go away, Elsie. You see how it is: I cannot and will not leave my father."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SQUIRE IS MASTERFUL.

> Thank God, bless God, all ye who suffer not
> More grief than ye can weep for. That is well
> That is light grieving.
>
> E. B. BROWNING.

MRS. ROMNEY pronounced these words with a sort of feverish determination, but Elsie stooped down and whispered in her ear,—

"You must leave him. The Squire is in the town; Mr. Lockhart told me so; he is at the club, expecting us. He intends to drive back in the wagonette."

"Romney at his club!" She gasped out the words with incredulous dismay.

"Yes, and at this very minute he will be looking for us. Mrs. Romney, you must come." And Catherine, with a dazed look, rose from her knees.

"That is why you are here to warn me. Thank you, Elsie.—Father dear, I must leave you for a little while." But the sick man detained her: a terrified expression came into his sunken eyes.

"You must not leave me. I will not be left with the child. What is she to do, if that woman comes? She will take away the doctor's stuff and drink the wine: that is what she did when poor little Eva was ill. Kitty, if you go away you will be an unnatural daughter.

What! leave your poor dying father! Shame, shame on you, Catherine!"

"Hush, father! you are cruel to agitate yourself in this way,—cruel to me and Eva. You shall not be alone long. The nurse Oliver saw will be here directly, and Dr. Evans promised to look in again."

"I will not have them. You know my dislike to strangers. I will have no one about me but you. Why must you leave me, Kitty? Surely your husband is not so unforgiving as to keep us apart now I am dying."

"Father, you are breaking my heart!" And Mrs. Romney kissed the gray head almost despairingly. "You are not dying; you shall not die. Let me go, and I will come soon again." And she tore herself away.

"Must you really go, Catherine?" and Eva stole timidly to her side; "he is really worse, and——"

"No, no; the wine has given him strength. Go back to him and talk to him cheerfully. You have nothing to fear, darling; Nurse Miriam will be with you directly.—Now, Elsie." And she led the way down-stairs.

"We are very late," Elsie murmured, as they took their places.

"Late, are we?" with a sudden look of alarm. "Elsie, you must help me with Romney, for I am almost worn out. Tell me," with sudden agitation, "do you think that he—my father is dying? I have never seen any one die."

"He looks very ill," returned Elsie, cautiously, but in her secret heart she felt the old man's days were numbered; she had no time to say more, for the Squire's tall figure was in sight, and, to Elsie's dismay, Rab Lockhart was with him. The little man seemed ubiquitous.

"Have we kept you waiting, dear?" asked Mrs. Romney, trying to speak in her usual manner, but her voice was hardly under control.

"Kept me waiting?" returned the Squire, wrathfully. "Are you aware I have been kicking up my heels in this blazing sun for the last half-hour? Rab tells me he gave my message to Elsie nearly three-quarters of an hour ago."

"Oh, yes, we got your message, but we had not finished all our business.—How do you do, Mr. Lockhart? are you waiting there in the hope of seeing Gussie pass?—Jump in, Romney; it is no use waiting any longer." But the Squire, who for once was out of temper, considered this speech as only an aggravation of the offence.

"Upon my word, Catherine, you are a cool hand! You might have the grace to say you are sorry for keeping me waiting.—No, thanks," as Rab with good-natured officiousness opened the door: "I shall take the reins from Archer." And with a decidedly sulky look and the air of a martyr the Squire mounted the box.

Catherine drew a long sigh of relief, but she spoke no word, but Rab whispered confidentially, "He'll be as sweet as a nut when he has had his luncheon and a pipe;" but the words were almost jerked out of his mouth, for the Squire had touched up Jess and Jasper so smartly that they curveted wildly and then dashed across the market-place.

Elsie gave a little cry of alarm, and Rab stood in the middle of the

road, looking after them anxiously; but he need not have troubled himself: the Squire was a splendid whip, and his spirited horses were entirely under his control.

Mrs. Romney leaned back in her corner. Her hands were clasped on her lap, and her eyes were full of tears. "He is vexed with me," she said, as though to herself, "and I do not wonder at it."

But the Squire could not long keep up his grievance, and his displeasure soon evaporated. Before many minutes were over he was carrying on a jerky conversation with Elsie over his shoulder, and by and by there was an admonition to Kitty to look out sharp at something. Mrs. Romney, who was crying silently behind her sunshade, tried to answer him, but her words failed to reach him. "Tell him the sun has made my head ache," she whispered, and Elsie repeated the message. But this harmless excuse only fanned the slumbering embers of his wrath again. Any ailment of his Kitty, however trifling, was a serious matter in his eyes.

"Another headache!" he muttered, and then he suddenly checked the horses just as they were passing a large red brick house, and Archer was despatched to the gate with a message.

Mrs. Romney got up from her seat in a hurry:

"Why have you sent Archer to Dr. Fergusson, Romney?"

"Because I wish him to look in some time this afternoon," returned her husband, coolly. "I have heard enough of these headaches, and I intend him to take you in hand properly. You have not been yourself for the last two or three weeks, and I shall ask him to put you to rights."

"You are very absurd, Romney. I am perfectly well, and Dr. Fergusson will only laugh at us both." But the Squire made no answer to this, and Catherine gave a weary little sigh as she went back to her corner. She knew too well that it was useless to contend with Romney when he was in one of these masterful moods, but the idea of being restrained and treated as an invalid was galling in the extreme.

Catherine was in that painful state of intense nervous tension when even a louder voice than usual made her tremble from head to foot: she could eat no luncheon, and made her headache a pretext for retiring from the table.

"I hope you consider that I have done a wise thing in asking Dr. Fergusson to call," observed her husband as he opened the door for her, but a few minutes later he followed her to her room.

Strange to say, the strong big man had the thoughtfulness and light touch of a woman in a sick-room. His irritation had died a natural death the moment he saw Catherine was really suffering, though he had no idea that it was mental and not bodily pain that made her contract her forehead and clinch her delicate hands. He shaded the windows carefully, and arranged the pillows on her couch, then he helped her unloosen the heavy braids of hair that seemed to oppress her. As he did so she suddenly drew his hand to her lips. "Oh, my darling," she whispered, "love me, love me always as well as you do now, or I could not live." But the Squire frowned, as though this little outburst displeased him.

"Now you are hysterical again," he said, in rather a repressive voice. "My dear child, I insist on your keeping yourself quiet until Fergusson comes. He will soon put you to rights. Shut your eyes, and try to sleep. I shall go down-stairs and keep the house as quiet as possible." But she caught hold of his coat-sleeve.

"Have you forgiven me, have you quite forgiven me, for keeping you waiting?"

"Forgiven? Nonsense!" and he kissed her forehead; "but I shall be angry with you in earnest if you say another word." And the Squire crept noiselessly out of the room; but his honest heart would have been wrung if he could have seen Catherine lying face downward on the couch, trying to control her sobs.

"If I have done wrong, if I have been weak, cowardly, it was because I loved you too much," she moaned, "because I dared not let you know my disobedience. Oh, God help me, what shall I do, what shall I do if he ever finds out that I have deceived him?"

Elsie had not yet found herself alone with Oliver. Some visitors had driven over after luncheon, and Lady Carfax had needed their presence in the drawing-room. Before they left Dr. Fergusson paid his visit, but it was some time before Romney joined them.

He seemed in rather a perturbed state of mind. Oliver had just left the room on some errand or other, and Elsie and Lady Carfax were alone.

"Well, Romney, what does Dr. Fergusson say about Catherine?" asked Lady Carfax, tranquilly. She did not herself think that there was much amiss with her daughter-in-law, only if Catherine's finger ached Romney made a fuss.

"He says that her nerves are in a most unsatisfactory state," returned her son, gloomily,—"that she is suffering from some mental pressure or strain. He saw her alone, and he assures me that he questioned her very closely, and that he is convinced that she has something on her mind, and, though she would not allow this, she did not exactly contradict him."

"What an absurd idea!" returned Lady Carfax, impatiently. "I hope you told him that Catherine was the happiest creature in the world. Her spirits are excellent. Why, she is the life of the house. No, no: she has been doing too much, and is a little below par. She wants a tonic to set her up."

"I wish I could agree with you, mother; but it seems to me that Catherine has flagged lately, and her spirits certainly have not been as good as usual. Don't you remember that evening when she was so hysterical? and she has been shedding tears more than once. She is irritable, too. I wonder," with a worried expression, "if anything can be troubling her!"

"Troubling her? Of course not," with the utmost scorn, for Lady Carfax had scant sympathy with nerves. "You are well, and Harry is well, and the servants do their duty: what should trouble a strong, healthy, happy young woman? I always said Dr. Fergusson is an alarmist; he always takes the worst view of your poor father's case. Well, what does he advise? what remedies does he intend to prescribe?"

"Oh, he says there is little to be done. He will send her some quieting medicine and a sleeping-draught for to-night. She is to rest as much as possible, and to avoid fatigue and late hours, and to take a little gentle exercise every day."

"And what made him come so late?"

"Oh, he said Evans wanted him to see a bad case in the town,—a stranger who had lately come to Draycott: it is a singular case of pressure on the brain; besides other complications, he seems to have a fancy that some woman—his wife, I think he said—was poisoning him. Fergusson seems to think it is a case for a lunatic asylum, only he is evidently too ill to be moved."

"Whom on earth are you talking about, Romney?" asked Oliver, who had just entered the room and had overheard the last words.

"Only a patient of Dr. Evans's,—I think the name was Frith, or Smith,—down in Church Street. The saddest part seems to be that there is quite a young daughter, a frightened nervous little creature, not a bit fit to attend such a case; but they are sending a nurse from the hospital."

"Elsie, will you come out for a stroll?" asked Oliver, abruptly, and the girl rose immediately. "Oh, Oliver, I have wanted to speak to you so badly!" she exclaimed, as they descended the grass slope towards the lake, "and I thought those stupid people would never go. I wanted to tell you that I have seen him,—Mrs. Romney's father; and what—what does it all mean?" facing round on the astonished young man.

Oliver uttered an exclamation; then he drew her hand through his arm. "There is no hurry," he said, coolly; "we have two hours before us. I will row you out into the middle of the lake, and you shall tell me everything from the beginning." And Elsie was soon in the midst of her narration. She had an excellent listener; Oliver never interrupted her by word or comment; now and then his oar splashed idly in the water; but when she had finished a look of relief came to his face.

"The secret is out," he said, quietly. "Now there is no irritating mystery between us. Yes, poor Mr. Vincent is very ill. I was sitting up with him last night, so I ought to know."

"But, Oliver——"

"Well, darling?"

"You must begin to talk now. I want to know the reason of all this secrecy. Why does Mrs. Romney keep her father's illness a secret from her husband?"

"I suppose the swans won't betray us if I take you into confidence; you have been a good child, Elsie, and you deserve your reward; Catherine cannot blame me if I tell you things now, as you know the main facts of the case. She has made a great mistake in keeping it dark from Romney. Romney is a generous fellow, and he would have helped her to the best of his ability, and if I do not mistake she will pay dearly for her weakness."

"Oh, Oliver, I hope not."

"I hope so too; but we Carfax men are a stiff-necked generation:

we believe in sturdy old-fashioned honesty and straightforward plain ways. I love you dearly, Elsie, as you know well, and when you are my wife I shall hope to love you a hundred times more, but if you disobeyed my express commands and acted in opposition to my wishes without giving me warning that the pressure of circumstances obliged you to do so, I should consider that my confidence was betrayed and that you were acting in an underhand way, and I fear—I very much fear—that you would forfeit my respect."

"Oh, no, Oliver! pray do not tell me that there is any fear of Mrs. Romney's losing her husband's respect."

"No, dear, I will tell you nothing; I will just put the circumstances before you, and you shall judge for yourself: there is plenty of sense in that pretty little head. And, mind, although I blame Mrs. Romney, I am heartily sorry for her, too. She has had a hard life of it, poor woman!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CATHERINE.

I am not fair, and therefore
I pray the gods make me honest.
SHAKESPEARE.

OLIVER paused a moment, as though he were in doubt where to begin, and Elsie seized the opportunity to ask him another question:

"Just tell me one thing. How long have you been Mrs. Romney's confidant?" but Oliver shook his head at her reprovingly.

"That is so like a woman: the feminine mind always wants to know the end before the beginning. You must allow me to tell my story in my own way, or it will never be told at all." And, thus rebuked, Elsie held her peace. Oliver could be masterful too when he chose: the Carfax brothers certainly possessed dominant wills.

"I told you how Romney and Catherine first met," he went on, looking at her inquiringly, and Elsie nodded, "and how my dearly-beloved brother took his own wilful way and disappointed his hosts by declining to fall in love with their handsome daughter, and how he courted the governess instead, but I have not told you that Catherine was hard to win.

"You know what a good-looking fellow Romney is: though I am his own brother, I declare I don't know a man to compare with him; and he has a kindly chivalrous way with women that wins their hearts. You may imagine his surprise and chagrin, then, at the quietly decided manner in which Catherine repelled his advances. He used to come to my diggings—you know the Firs was only three or four miles from Aldershot—looking quite down and miserable. I never saw a fellow so much in love in my life until I met a certain young person at a certain ball, and then I knew how it felt; but in spite of my want of experience I was very sorry for Romney.

"He used to drop into my favorite hammock-chair with a sigh that almost blew me away.

"'It is no use,' he would say; 'she keeps me at arm's length and

avoids me as much as possible; she used to be quite friendly at first, but ever since I sent her those flowers she seems afraid to let me come near her; if I speak to her in the drawing-room of an evening she walks off to the piano and asks one of the boys to turn over her leaves for her; she will never let me do that for her if she can help it, ever since the night I told her that her voice haunted me.'

"'You may depend upon it, it is pure cussedness,' I would tell him. 'Miss Vincent may be a very superior young woman, but I dare say she is not different from the rest of her sex: she is just trying it on a bit.'

"'You are quite wrong,' he returned, warmly; 'she has no nonsense of that sort, and—and, in spite of her seeming coldness, I am convinced she is not as indifferent as she would have me believe,' and here Romney grew very red. 'Once or twice I have seen her change color when I have come upon her unexpectedly, and—well, you will know for yourself one day, old fellow, what these little things mean,' but I am afraid I laughed derisively at this.

"The next day he came he brought me an invitation from Mrs. Trafford. I was to dine and sleep at the Firs. They were very hospitable people, and there were other marriageable daughters besides Felicia."

"Oh, Oliver! how can you be so wicked?"

"My dear little girl, I had had all my innocence knocked out of me early in life. I was quite a shy fellow until the young ladies taught me to flirt; and then, I own, I was an apt pupil. I had not quite completed my education in this respect, for I tried to back out, much to Romney's disgust.

"'You might think of me,' he said, reproachfully. 'You are the only brother I have. I want you to see Miss Vincent and to give me your candid opinion how I stand with her. I cannot go on much longer in this way; it is making me quite thin; the Traffords, too, are beginning to be suspicious, and Felicia is growing cold: could you not take her off my hands for one evening? I would do as much for you.' And, as I found it impossible to refuse this touching request, I consented to be victimized, and packed my gladstone.

"I did not see Catherine until we were just going in to dinner; she had entered the room while Miss Angela Trafford was showing me the conservatory: Angela was a pretty, artless little girl, and I rather enjoyed the business." But here there was an indignant remonstrance on Elsie's part.

"You are just saying that to tease me, but I know, I know," with a triumphant tone in her voice, "that you never flirted in your life; Mrs. Romney told me that. I don't care a bit if Angela were as pretty as she could be, I would trust you with a dozen Angelas."

"Should you darling? That is just what I wanted you to say. My bait had a nibble immediately. When we went back to the drawing-room I saw Romney speaking to a young lady in black; she was somewhat pale and unattractive-looking, and I never imagined for a moment it was Miss Vincent. Romney had praised her so enthusiastically that I failed to recognize his description; though she was cer-

tainly very graceful-looking. I was rather taken aback, then, when he said, somewhat eagerly, 'Miss Vincent, this is my brother, Captain Carfax,' in a voice that would have betrayed him to the most indifferent person. 'I want you two to be good friends.'

"I was bound to confess that this was somewhat cool on Romney's part, considering the small encouragement he had received; and I was not at all surprised that Miss Vincent bowed to me rather coldly. I saw then that she had fine eyes, with a great deal of expression in them, and that her hands and arms were unusually beautiful.

"She sat beside me at dinner, but Angela Trafford was on my right hand, and I found no opportunity of speaking to her for some time. When I did so I found her quite ready to converse with me; her brief coldness had vanished, and she was full of animation: before many minutes had passed I thought her charming; she was brimful of intelligence, and her manner was so unconscious and yet so sprightly that I began to understand Romney's infatuation.

"I did not mention his name for some time, and this was quite involuntary on my part, but a marked change came over her at once. She grew pale and seemed to stiffen. I pretended not to notice this, but continued talking about him, and she became more syllabic and still more icy, and seemed almost glad when Mrs. Trafford gave the signal for the ladies to rise.

"When we returned to the drawing-room Catherine was singing. That beautiful voice drew me to the piano at once. Romney followed me, but after an instant he drew back and took up his station beside Felicia's chair; his attitude was somewhat moody; he seemed lost in thought; he was pulling his moustache in a perplexed hopeless sort of way—you know what I mean.

"The corner where I stood was a dark one, and I believe Catherine was unconscious of my presence. When she had finished her song she turned over her music to find another; then I saw her suddenly pause and fix her eyes on Romney. I shall never forget her expression: if ever woman loved a man Catherine loved Romney, I was convinced of that; then I saw a distressed flush come to her face, her lip suddenly quivered, and she bent over her music again.

"I did not speak to her again that evening; neither did Romney; I think he purposely held aloof. When she finished singing, she played chess with Mr. Trafford until the men retired to the smoking-room.

"Romney came to my room late that night.

"'Well,' he said, abruptly, 'what do you think of her? It was evident she liked you. I never saw her so animated.'

"'I thought her very interesting,' was my response. 'She is not handsome, but somehow she impresses her individuality on you. Perhaps it is not too strong to say she has a charming personality.'

"'My dear fellow,' and here Romney positively beamed, 'I knew you would appreciate her, you are both so genuine. And now tell me if you think I have any chance with her?'

"'Go in and win,' was my encouraging reply; 'you shall have my congratulations beforehand;' and I sent him to bed radiant.

"The next morning I encountered Miss Vincent and her pupils in the garden: they were feeding their pets, and she was reading in the fernery. She welcomed me with a smile, and I at once entered into conversation with her. She looked tired and a little sad, and there was a plaintiveness in her voice, but she surprised me very much by asking after Romney:

"'He did not seem in spirits last night. I don't think the place suits him. Why don't you advise him to have a thorough change?'

"She spoke impulsively, but she evidently meant what she said.

"'I am afraid I should have no influence with him, Miss Vincent: the Firs has too great an attraction for him.'

"I suppose my manner was a little pointed. She blushed violently, and seemed agitated for a moment; then she summoned up her courage for another effort:

"'We have seen a great deal of Mr. Carfax lately. He has been very kind; I should think it is his nature to be kind. Mrs. Trafford is devoted to him: she is always asking him to stay. It is a pity if the place does not suit him.'

"'Why do you think it does not suit him? You may depend upon it, my brother would not come if it did not please him. Men are not so unselfish.'

"'Oh, he is not selfish; no one is less so. I know him very well; we are good friends; that is why I think he needs a change. This sandy soil does not suit everybody: you should tell him so; please do,' almost pleadingly; and I could see then what beautiful eyes she had: in spite of the strangeness of her words, there was something so gentle and earnest in her expression that I could not turn them off with a laugh. I felt that she was appealing to me for help, that she had come to some crisis in her life when she wanted a friend.

"'I will tell him so, if you wish it, that you consider the place does not suit him, that you are sure he needs a change.'

"'Yes, tell him that: he is very good-natured; he will not be angry. Thank you very much, Captain Carfax.' She sighed, and then abruptly changed the subject by speaking of the book she held in her hand: 'It is a good book: it helps me very much; it is sad, but there are such beautiful thoughts in it: the writer was too introspective, and everything discouraged him, and in some sense his life was a failure, but, as the introduction so truly says, "all thinkers are at home with him."'

"I took the book from her hand: it was, as I guessed, the 'Journal Intime of Henry Frederick Amiel.' I had seen reviews of it. I read out the first words that caught my eye: 'We dream alone, we suffer alone, we die alone, we inhabit the last resting-place alone,' and then I paused.

"'Oh, you have not finished the passage,' she said, with quick animation. 'Read what he says next: "There is nothing to prevent us from opening our solitude to God." Amiel speaks well there; but, after all, is one in any sense alone? even in our solitude we cannot strip ourselves of the thoughts, the memories, of others; we are still guided and governed by invisible monitors; even in our loneliness the

footsteps of our friends leave their mark everywhere.' And when she had said this she closed the book and called the children to her. I found an opportunity to give Miss Vincent's message while they were hurrying my horse round to the stable. When Romney heard it a brightness came into his eyes.

"'Did she say that? I will speak to her to-night; she knows already that I love her, but to-night I will ask her to be my wife.'

"'All right,' was my response. After all, Romney was at liberty to choose his own wife: Miss Vincent was a gentlewoman, it was easy to see that, and what did her poverty matter? Romney had money enough for both. I had always been democratic in my views on social questions, and it did not in the least shock me that my future sister-in-law was a governess.

"There were some military manœuvres the next day, and it was late in the afternoon when I returned to my hut, heated and jaded: when I opened the door I saw Romney extended in the hammock-chair, looking cool and comfortable. He jumped up and grasped my hand.

"'Wish me joy, lad!' he said, excitedly. 'Catherine is mine, after all: she has accepted me; but it was a hard tussle. You must drink our health in some hock and seltzer water. I have taken the liberty to give some orders in your absence.'

"'I congratulate you heartily,' was my reply, 'but I refuse to hear another word until I have had my tub and got into some fresh garments;' and, though Romney grumbled, only my fox-terrier Wasp was the recipient of his growls; but when I returned refreshed and in excellent temper he took his revenge. Oh, ye gods, how he did talk! but my pipe consoled me: dear as the charms of young love was that pipe to my soul! Well, Elsie,"—another reproachful look,—"have you not got reconciled to your all-powerful rival yet?"

"Oh, go on with your story," she returned, in a vexed voice. "I understand your jokes, and they do not in the least trouble me, but all the same you are incorrigible."

"I have not half educated her yet, you see," returned Oliver, apostrophizing the swans, "but there is plenty of time. Tobacco certainly supported me that afternoon under the torrent of Romney's eloquence; and I do not mind confessing to you that I was a bit interested.

"Catherine had refused him at first, but with such tears and agitation that he had declined to take her answer, and had at last compelled her to acknowledge that she was far from indifferent to him.

"'But I must not—I ought not to marry you,' she kept saying, and then at last it all came out: she loved him, but she was proud, and she could not endure that his people should consider her beneath him.

"'We are poor, dreadfully poor,' she went on; and then, with the openness and candor that seemed natural to her, she told him about her life.

"It was rather a pitiful story. Her father was of good family, but he had been unfortunate; nothing seemed to prosper with him: he had begun life as a barrister, but had never succeeded in holding a brief;

then he had taken pupils and married a pretty, penniless girl, very gentle and amiable, but she had died when Catherine was about twelve years old, leaving her with a baby sister.

"During the fourteen years of his married life Mr. Vincent had tried many things and failed in all. He had been journalist, reporter, a literary hack, and had hardly been able to keep his head above water: he had no want of brain, but he was deficient in ballast, and he lacked backbone. Even Catherine, who adored her father, owned that he was lamentably weak: 'unstable as water, thou shalt not excel,' might have been written of Stephen Vincent. And yet the man had influential friends: one of these educated Catherine, and at fourteen she was sent to a good finishing-school at Brighton. The lady who was her benefactress died a few years afterwards, but while she lived Catherine never wanted a friend.

"At this time Mr. Vincent was doing some desultory literary work, and he and the child Eva were lodging at a house at Hendon, kept by a widow, a Mrs. Stewart. During her brief visits Catherine took a great dislike to this woman. She had beauty of a certain coarse type, and an easy good-natured manner that imposed on people, but Catherine, who was older than her years, was not deceived by Mrs. Stewart's plausible speeches, and she saw signs that warned her that she had a hard, sensual nature.

"More than once she entreated her father to change his lodgings; but, in spite of his weakness, Mr. Vincent had an obstinate will: the place suited him, he said, and Eva throve under Mrs. Stewart's care; she was very good to them both, and he had never been more comfortable; and Catherine was obliged to yield the point; but if she had guessed the extent of her father's danger she would never have left him.

"Alas! before two months were over Mr. Vincent had taken the fatal step of making Mrs. Stewart his wife, and when it was too late he found he had united himself for life to a coarse-minded and evil woman.

"With what arts she had beguiled him must be left to the imagination; but, her object obtained, she almost at once threw off her disguise. When Catherine paid her next visit she was almost heart-broken at the sight of her father's wretchedness: his wife had become a terror to him; she ruled him with a rod of iron, and Eva was neglected and even ill-treated.

"'She frightens me with her violence, Catherine,' he said: 'she is cruel to me and the child. She drinks, I know she drinks, and then she loses all control. You must stay and take care of us both.' But, alas, that was just what Catherine could not do; her step-mother hated her, she knew that, and during those brief visits she had to put up with many an insult. The poor girl, with all her courage, was no match for her.

"'Why did you marry him if you meant to make him so wretched?' she exclaimed once, unable to bear the sight of her father's misery.

"'I had my own reasons, you may be sure of that,' returned the woman, defiantly, 'or do you think I would have saddled myself

with a poor creature like Vincent, and a brat of a child as well, who never had chicks of my own? Oh, I had my reasons, though I am not going to tell you them, miss. Perhaps I wished to marry a gentleman; perhaps I was tired of my own name and wanted to get rid of it. Anyhow, I have made a poor bargain of it. Why, your father hardly earns his own victuals: I am keeping him and the child. "Write, why don't you write?" I say to him, when I bring him his pens and paper; "it is brains you are wanting, I expect," though he has the audacity to say that I prevent him from putting pen to paper!'

"Poor Catherine! she told Romney that every farthing she could spare was spent in procuring little comforts for her father and Eva; and what she suffered on their account was known only to herself. When her education was finished she had obtained a good situation as a governess; and since then she had clothed Eva as well as herself. It was the thought of this miserable home, with the consciousness that her father and Eva depended upon her for all their comforts, that made her think that she had no right to marry; but Romney soon convinced her that this was sheer pride and morbidness, and he had at last gained her promise to become his wife."

CHAPTER XV.

WOMAN'S WEAKNESS.

By and by is easily said.

AT this point Oliver took out his watch.

"I must hurry up, child, if I am to finish before dinner-time. You know all about Romney's brief courtship, and the Traffords' coolness, and how my mother never saw Catherine until she was Romney's wife.

"A little while before their marriage they went down to Hendon. He gave me an account of his visit afterwards.

"'Mr. Vincent is a gentleman,' he said to me, 'but he is utterly broken down and at his wife's mercy: she is a loud-voiced, brazen-faced woman, and her tongue must be a terrible scourge: there is no doubt that she drinks, but she was sober enough on this occasion, and perfectly civil to Catherine and myself; but it made my blood boil to hear her sneering innuendoes over her husband's helplessness and shiftless ways: he hardly dared open his mouth, for fear of some retort, and the poor child Eva looked utterly cowed.

"'I did my best for them. I promised Mr. Vincent that he should receive an allowance from the date of our marriage, on the understanding that Eva should be sent to a good school; for really it was terrible to think of the poor child being left to the tender mercies of her stepmother, and certainly her father was no protector. But, to my surprise, Mr. Vincent objected to this arrangement; he could not part with the child, he said; they had never been separated; the very idea seemed to agitate him. But Mrs. Vincent interrupted him.

"'"I have no patience to hear you, Vincent!" she said, rudely.

"I wonder you aren't ashamed to expose your weakness before strangers. Not part with Missy? And who do you suppose is going to educate her?—He does not mean it, Mr. Carfax: he will come to his senses and thank you kindly for providing for the child, or I'll know the reason why," she muttered.

"'"Father, it will be for Eva's good," pleaded Catherine; and then at last he consented. "She is my only comfort," he groaned, when his wife had left the room for a moment. "I shall never be able to live without her! it is cruel to take her from me!" but for the child's sake we were obliged to be firm. He was only reaping the result of his own fatal weakness: why should the innocent be sacrificed? He is selfish as well as weak,' went on Romney. 'I dare not tell Catherine so, for, with all his faults, she believes in him; but he is a man I could never respect.'

"For the first year after their marriage, things went on fairly well: the quarterly allowance was paid and acknowledged, and when they went to town Catherine always saw her father: they had moved to Notting Hill then.

"Catherine always returned in low spirits from these visits: in her opinion things were becoming worse. Eva had not yet been sent to school, and only carried on a few desultory studies with her father's help, and even these had been discontinued of late. Catherine noticed a lamentable change in her father: a strange listlessness and lethargy seemed creeping over him, as though some numbing influence were clouding his faculties: at times he was excited and irritable, and his fear of his wife seemed to have increased to a nervous dread.

"'I dare not thwart her,' he said: 'if I do, she visits it on Eva: she makes me suffer through the child. The spirits madden her, and then I am in terror of my life. I am always afraid of something dreadful happening. I dare not trust Eva out of my sight; it is she who will not let her go to school: she says we want the money; but she keeps it all.' Catherine used to carry home sorrowful tales to Romney, but he once told me in confidence that he distrusted Mr. Vincent. 'He has not a straightforward look about him: you know what I mean. I dare say circumstances are too hard for him, poor beggar: one ought not to judge him harshly; that woman is his master. Don't you wish, Oliver, that we could lock up such creatures? they are the plague and pestilence of our civilized life; and, upon my word, it is a form of madness.'

"One day I went down to Frythe unexpectedly, and found Catherine in terrible trouble. Romney's banker had sent for him: a cheque for a large amount, payable to Stephen Vincent, had been detained; the cheque was genuine and in Romney's handwriting, but the figures had been evidently altered, but so clumsily that suspicion had been excited. 'We did not like the look of the affair,' observed the cashier: 'the young lady who brought it could give no information, so we thought it best to send for you, Mr. Carfax, as the ordinary quarterly amount was more than quadrupled.'

"Romney thanked them, and explained that some one had certainly been tampering with the cheque, but that he had no wish to convict the

offender; he would settle the matter in his own way; and, without returning home, he went at once to Notting Hill.

"'It was an abominable business,' he said to me afterwards: 'it sickens me to think of it. That woman was in the room, and refused to leave me alone with her husband. When I threw the cheque on the table I saw Mr. Vincent turn ashy pale and throw up his hands. "If one of us has to be sent to prison it ought to be my wife," he cried. "It was she who tempted me to do it, who stood looking over my shoulder all the time. I have been an honest man all my life, in spite of my misfortunes; and she has been my curse!" And the poor wretch burst into tears.'

"Catherine was almost beside herself when she told me what had happened. 'My poor, poor father,' she sobbed, 'who was the soul of honor, and never owed a penny even in his worst straits! I do not believe that he did it; or, if he did, he was not himself. I have told Romney more than once that I am sure that his intellect is becoming clouded with misery; but he does not believe me: he thinks that he has done this thing. And now he has forbidden me to go near him; he says it is not safe for us to have dealings with them. The allowance is to be paid in a different way; for my sake he will not discontinue it; but he says it is only on the understanding that I will never have anything more to do with them during that woman's lifetime.'

"'And Eva?'

"'He has promised that all possible efforts shall be made to withdraw Eva from her step-mother. Oh, he was very kind; he said my visits did more harm than good,—that Mrs. Vincent merely traded upon us, and that, even if I differed from him in opinion, I owed him a wife's obedience, and that he had every right on his side;' and of course I took Romney's part.

"Romney was perfectly open with me.

"'It is spoiling Catherine's life,' he said: 'they give her no peace, between them. To satisfy her, I make the old man a sufficient allowance. I can and will do no more. She can write to them, but I will not allow her to enter that woman's house.'

"I heard nothing more for eighteen months or so. Harry was born, and Catherine remained in a delicate state for some time. She wrote to her father from time to time, but he seldom answered; but Eva wrote pathetic little letters, which were always shown to Romney.

"Three months ago, I had come down here for a flying visit. Romney had been suddenly called up to London to attend a friend's funeral, and meant to sleep two or three nights in town. I thought Catherine in wonderfully good spirits, considering his absence; and we had a very pleasant evening. I remember I had just been to a certain ball, and what must Catherine do but pounce upon my secret? 'You have fallen in love, you naughty boy,' she said, immediately she saw me: 'you are not a bit yourself. Now tell me all about her.' And—would you believe it, Elsie?—I was fool enough to fall into the trap. I do not know which of us enjoyed ourselves most; for Catherine is like you,—she dearly loves a love-story. But my pleasure was not of long continuance. The very next day a note was brought to Catherine that

seemed to agitate her; she said nothing at the time, but a little while afterwards she told me that she had business that would oblige her to go to Draycott.

"I offered to drive her there, but she hesitated visibly; when I persisted, she begged me to set her down at that big draper's,—Willcox's, isn't it?—telling me that she would meet me in the market-place at twelve o'clock; but I waited for her a full hour before she joined me. She had her veil down, but I noticed at once that her eyes were red and swollen as though she had been crying; but it was impossible to question her, as Reynolds would have overheard every word: so I talked to her on indifferent subjects, and she answered me at random.

"She did not appear at luncheon, and my mother told me that she had a bad headache and was lying down; but she had recovered herself by dinner-time, and, though she looked wretchedly ill, she made an effort to talk as usual.

"I intended to find out the reason of this sudden fit of depression; but I bided my time until my mother had left us, and then I questioned her very closely. Her answers were decidedly evasive, and more than once she contradicted herself; but I persevered, and her agitation increased, and at last she burst into tears and told me everything. Her father and Eva were in Draycott. Mr. Vincent, driven to desperation by the misery of his home, had formed the singular resolution of escaping from his wife and putting himself and Eva under Catherine's protection; he had taken a few sovereigns out of his wife's purse while she lay in one of her heavy stupors, and Eva had willingly accompanied him. Her step-mother's evil tempers made the poor girl's life a perfect torment to her, and in her innocence and inexperience she thought that Catherine would approve of this step.

"A pencilled note sent by hand informed Catherine that they were at the Temperance Hotel in Cannon Street, and on her arrival she found, to her dismay, that these two helpless creatures were looking to her as their sole refuge. The pitiful story that Eva told her nearly broke her heart, and the girl's thin wan looks alarmed her,—she had evidently outgrown her strength; and her education was almost wholly neglected. Latterly they had kept no servant; and Eva's rough and coarsened hands told their own tale.

"But Catherine's chief fear was for her father: he was evidently out of health, and the signs of clouded intellect were clearly apparent: he seemed to have a fixed idea that his wife meant to compass his and Eva's death, and he declared no power on earth would induce him to return to her; and Eva assured her sister that all persuasions and arguments would be fruitless.

"Catherine was at her wits' end; and then she remembered a tidy hard-working woman whose child she had once befriended and who let lodgings in Church Street. Mrs. Tilsit was a kind-hearted person and thoroughly honest: she would represent the case to her, only keeping back the fact that Mr. Vincent was her father; and she thought if she changed the name to Smith it would be safer on all accounts.

"She started at once for Church Street, and, to her relief, found that the rooms were unoccupied. Mrs. Tilsit expressed herself perfectly

willing to care for the poor gentleman, and the moderate sum she named was quite within Catherine's means.

"Mr. Vincent—or rather Mr. Smith, as he consented to call himself—seemed quite satisfied with the look of the rooms: they were small, and the furniture humble, but they were exquisitely clean; and Eva took a great fancy to the buxom, cheerful-looking landlady.

"'I will make the old gentleman as comfortable as comfortable. Don't say another word, Mrs. Carfax: it is enough for me that they are friends of yours. Don't I remember all your kindness to Johnnie when he had his leg cut off in the hospital! ah, well, the dear lamb is better off, isn't he? though I do crave sadly after him still.' And the good woman wiped her eyes gently with her apron.

"Catherine had left them looking fairly cheerful, but you may imagine the feelings with which I listened to her. I had promised to keep her confidence, little thinking what she had to tell me.

"My first words were to entreat her to write to Romney, or to tell him immediately on his return. I understood her to say that she intended to do so, and this at once relieved me.

"I left the next day, and you know what happened then, darling: was it any wonder that my own affairs so entirely absorbed me that I scarcely remembered Mr. Vincent's existence? now and then a feeling of surprise crossed me that Catherine did not write; when her letter came it was full of sisterly congratulation on my engagement, but she never mentioned her father.

"You remember I went down from Friday to Monday, as my mother wished to see me. I found Catherine apparently cheerful, but it struck me once or twice that she avoided being alone with me. This excited my suspicion, and I determined to watch my opportunity.

"As we were walking home from church together,—Romney was in front, with Mrs. Vickars,—Catherine was telling me an anecdote about Harry, but I interrupted her:

"'I will hear that presently. I want to know why you have not written to me, Catherine. Was Romney vexed when he heard your father was in Draycott?' But at this question she turned pale and hung her head.

"'He does not know yet,' she faltered. 'Oh, Oliver, don't look at me in that way, as though you blamed me! I have tried a dozen times to tell him, and I cannot, I dare not! Oh, I am a pitiful coward, but I dare not make him angry.'

"'Why do you suppose he would be angry?' I replied. 'You are very wrong, Catherine. I never thought you could be so weak. Do you mean to tell me that for six weeks you have kept this secret from your husband?'

"'Yes, and it is killing me. I suffer—oh, what I suffer! but I dare not tell him: when I try my lips seem glued together. What would he say if he knew I had disobeyed and deceived him?'

"'Of course he would be angry; but at least you can be sure of his forgiveness;' but Catherine shook her head.

"'He would never trust me again; and yet what am I to do, Oliver?' wringing her hands. 'My father is dying: it is only a ques-

tion of weeks; Dr. Evans says so: his brain is affected, and at times he suffers terribly.'

"'Do you think that Romney would be hard on a dying man? What has become of your good sense, Catherine? If you had trusted your husband six weeks ago you would have had no reason to dread his anger. Why did you not write to him, as I bade you? why did you not say to him, "I have disobeyed you; my father is at Draycott, and I am taking care of him"? Do you suppose Romney would have been hard on you?'

"'Oh, I was wrong, very wrong,' she sobbed, 'but you do not understand. Where Romney is concerned I am a coward. I see my mistake as plainly as you do; but you must not think it was intentional: every day I meant to tell Romney. I have tried to do so over and over again, but my courage failed: "I will tell him to-morrow; I shall be stronger to-morrow,"—that is what I would say to myself.'

"'But, Catherine, this is sheer madness. Romney will find it out for himself the next time the allowance is paid.'

"'It has been paid,' she returned, quickly. 'Mrs. Vincent signed the receipt: she said her husband was ill in bed. She did not wish Romney to know that he had left her.'

"'Did Romney tell you this?'

"'Yes. Oh, don't look at me so sternly, Oliver! I really was beginning to tell him then, only Lady Carfax came into the room, and Romney changed the subject.'

"'There is one other thing, Catherine. Are you not afraid that Romney will come face to face with Eva?'

"'He has done so, but he has not recognized her. Eva was a child when he saw her last. There is no danger of that sort: my father is confined to his room.'

"'Shall I tell Romney for you?' but she negatived this with great agitation.

"'No: I will tell him myself. I will,—indeed I will. I will humble myself to him and ask his pardon, and then—oh, yes, he will be good to me.'

"'Come, that is spoken like yourself, Catherine.'

"And then Romney turned back to meet us, and we could say no more. When I went away the next morning she told me of her own accord that she meant to speak to Romney that night, but she would not promise to write to me; she said such a letter would be very painful, and that when I brought you down to the Frythe she would tell me all about it.

"You can understand, Elsie, my disgust and disappointment, on that first evening when I left you so long alone, when Catherine informed me that Romney was still in ignorance, and that as her father could not last many days she should not tell him until all was over. I was very angry, and accused her of purposely breaking her promise to me, but she assured me with tears that she fully meant to keep her word, but that her courage always failed.

"'You cannot feel the contempt I feel for myself,' she exclaimed, bitterly. 'I loathe myself for my cowardice. Oh, you were right,

Oliver: if I had told Romney at once he would have helped me; but now I cannot, I dare not; he would put my father in a lunatic asylum: he is not sane, I know, but he is so weak, and he cannot live.'

"I tried to reason her out of this idea; but this morbid fancy had taken possession of her, and she said Eva had the same terror. Romney was always praising up the Draycott asylum and saying what a skilful and clever doctor managed it and how admirably everything was arranged.

"'Dr. Evans proposed it too,' she went on: 'he said he would have every comfort there, and the best of nursing; but, Oliver, I want him to die in peace. If Mrs. Tilsit cannot manage, I will get a nurse. He shall have everything that I can give him.'

"I asked her if he was violent, and she said very seldom, and that he was growing weaker. When I questioned her about money arrangements she hesitated, and then confessed that she had recently parted with a handsome bracelet that Sir Henry had given her, and she thankfully accepted my offer to help her.

"You can guess the rest for yourself, Elsie. You know now why I spent the night out. Mrs. Tilsit was worn out, and needed help. Catherine still obstinately refuses to tell Romney until her father's death, and then she means to plead with him for Eva; she wants her to live at the Frythe. I do not wish you to be too hard on Catherine, though I own I have lost patience with her. Listen, dear: is not that the gong? I must put you ashore at once. And, for pity's sake, don't look so miserable, or my mother will think we have quarrelled." But, though Elsie laughed hysterically at this idea, her eyes were wet. "Poor Mrs. Romney!" she sighed as she crossed the lawn; "but how can any one act so foolishly?"

CHAPTER XVI.

ELSIE'S DILEMMA.

I give him joy that's awkward at a lie.
YOUNG.

OLIVER'S narrative made a painful impression on Elsie which she found it impossible to shake off.

She was perplexed by this sudden revelation of weakness: that a woman so naturally frank and upright as Catherine Carfax should indulge in morbid fears and moral cowardice would have puzzled a wiser and older head; and yet who could blame her? was it not the strength and piety of her filial love that made the idolizing wife stoop to deceive her husband? Granted that her fears were groundless and that she had no real cause to dread Romney's treatment of her father, yet was there no nobility, however mistaken, in that secret watching beside a dying bed, in those stolen interviews when she was as a ministering angel to him and Eva?

"Let him die in peace," was her inward cry. "What will anything matter afterwards? Let me close his eyes,—and then—then Romney shall learn everything."

When Elsie entered the drawing-room, she was surprised to see Mrs. Romney lying on the couch by the open window, talking to her mother-in-law: she greeted Elsie with a faint smile and held out a hot hand to her. "I am in the hands of the Philistines," she said, with an attempt at playfulness. "Dr. Fergusson and Romney are as disagreeable as possible, and are determined to treat me as an invalid; but I mean to fight for my freedom."

"You are the worst patient I ever knew," returned Romney, who seemed to have recovered his spirits. "Is she not a bit of quicksilver, mother?" And Lady Carfax gave an assenting smile.

"Are you not coming to dinner?" asked Elsie, as the Squire offered his arm to his mother, and Catherine did not rise.

"No: my lord and master has decided that I am to remain here," replied Mrs. Romney, but there was a vexed chord in her voice. "Go in with Oliver, my dear. All men are tyrants: you will find that out for yourself some day." But Romney only shook his head indulgently at this rebellious speech. "She is as weak and shaky as possible," he observed, *sotto voce:* "she is only fit to lie there. Elsie, I think I shall make you head nurse to-morrow. You will have to carry out my orders most stringently."

"Is to-morrow your day at Winton?" asked Oliver.

"Yes; I have to see Hudson about the short-horns; I think I shall take the ten-fifty train: that will give me plenty of time."

"And you will come back by the five-thirty as usual?"

"Yes; I could not possibly catch the two-forty-five, and there is no other train.—So mind, Elsie, I leave you in charge. Catherine is to go no farther than the garden; if she wants a walk I will take her myself when I return: she exposes herself too much to the sun; a stroll between six and seven will do her far more good. And don't let Harry tire her. She is to have entire rest for a few days: those are Fergusson's orders."

"I will do my best," returned Elsie, rather nervously, but her heart sank a little at the task imposed upon her. Supposing Mrs. Romney chose to be contumacious? but at least Oliver would help her; but, to her dismay, she heard him say the next minute that he meant to accompany his brother, a proposition that seemed to please the Squire.

"You are sure you will take that train back?" he asked, a little anxiously.

"Quite sure, my dear fellow. Have you any idea of the heaps of business I have to transact? Why, I have not been over to Winton for the last three months." And so the matter was settled.

When dinner was over, Elsie found herself alone with Mrs. Romney for ten minutes.

"Have you had your orders, Elsie?" asked Catherine, in a queer voice, as the girl came up to her; and Elsie nodded assent.

"Ah! I thought so," leaning back a little wearily on her cushions. "I have had mine too. Let me see,"—checking the items off on her fingers,—"breakfast in bed, a thing I hate,—but we will let that pass —poor Romney! he means well,—Harry for half an hour, but no longer, a stroll in the garden, a nap after luncheon,—can naps be fur-

nished to order, Elsie?—and very weak tea, a decoction I loathe. There, I have forgotten the rest."

"I hope you mean to be good, or you will get me into trouble." But Mrs. Romney made no answer to this, and directly her husband came into the room she pleaded fatigue and retired.

"I wish you were not going to Winton," observed Elsie, rather wistfully, as she and Oliver wandered about in the summer twilight. "You are always leaving me now."

"I proposed it, dear, because Romney thinks I neglect him: he does so dearly love a companion. If Catherine had been stronger she would have gone with him, but she certainly does not look fit for much. I don't think you will have much trouble with her, Elsie, for she will not dare to take out the horses, as it would reach Romney's ears."

"Then she will not want to go to Draycott?" returned Elsie, brightening up visibly at this.

"I dare say that in her heart she will be longing to go, but she knows Reynolds would tell his master that the horses had been out, as mother wants them in the afternoon. No, no; set your mind at rest; there will be no drive to Draycott." And Elsie was much relieved to hear this.

"Be a good girl, Elsie, and take care of Catherine," were Romney's parting words, as he and Oliver drove off from the door: from an upper window the hand that Romney thought the fairest in the world waved him a farewell.

Elsie stood on the steps watching them. Her eyes rested a little wistfully on the brothers; their expression was soft and dreamy: the young fair-haired officer, with his grave face and quiet ways, had taken possession of her and her life. Did Elsie any longer regret her lost freedom? did her bonds continue to gall her? The sweet, smiling brightness of her face contradicted such a notion. "Loyal and true, true and loyal," was the Vaughan motto.

A peal of baby laughter roused her from her abstraction, and soon she and Harry were pelting each other with daisies on the lawn. Now and then Catherine stood by her window to watch them: the limp crushed flowers in the little fat hand, the joy with which each frail blossom was hurled at his play-fellow, the exulting shout when one reached her, formed a lovely sight to the mother's heart.

Elsie had forgotten all about her charge. Harry was clamoring to see the water-fowl, and she carried him herself to the lake, while his nurse went back to the house to fetch some needlework. Directly she returned Elsie put down the stuttering, remonstrating boy and bade him pick some more daisies, and then she went in search of Mrs. Romney.

"She must be dressed by this time," thought she, "and I shall coax her down to the shady seat by the water;" but as she knocked briskly at the door of Catherine's room, no answering voice bade her enter. The room was in disorder, and Eliza, the deaf housemaid, was making the bed. Elsie ran down-stairs again, but the drawing-room and the library were empty, and the white Persian cat was the sole tenant of

the morning room. In the hall she encountered Emma, the under-housemaid. "Is Mrs. Romney in the east wing?" she asked.

"No, ma'am; she has gone out," returned the girl, "and she asked me to give you this note, as she would not be back to luncheon."

Elsie suppressed an exclamation with difficulty.

"Gone out? Are you sure, Emma?" she asked, as she took the note.

"Oh, yes, ma'am; she left the house ten minutes ago, when you and Master Baby were down by the lake. She went down the shrubbery path, and let herself out by the green gate."

Elsie made no answer, and as soon as Emma was out of sight she tore open the note; it only contained a few sentences: "Forgive me, Elsie dear, for giving you the slip, but it was the best thing to do. I am going to Draycott by train; there is only a mile to walk, and I shall take the four-fifteen train back; that will bring me home long before Romney returns from Winton. Put Gran off the scent; but it is just possible that she will have luncheon with Sir Henry. Adieu. Do not be vexed with me, little one."

Elsie could have sat down and cried hot tears of indignation and alarm. Was Mrs. Romney mad, to walk to the station in this broiling heat,—for it was a sultry, airless morning,—and in her weak state, too? She meant to be absent for hours; she would time herself to arrive just before her husband's train was due. "Oh, it is madness, sheer madness!" raged Elsie. "What am I to do if Lady Carfax questions me? I have never told a lie in my life, and I never will. She has gone to Draycott by train,—can I say anything else? and it will all come out before the Squire. Oh, if only Oliver had not gone! I had a misgiving last night, but he only laughed at me: he said she would never dare to go to Draycott."

Elsie was working herself up to fresh indignation, when Lady Carfax's voice sounded from the east wing. The window of her sitting-room opened on the terrace where Elsie was standing.

"Elsie, my dear." And Elsie slipped the note into her pocket, and hurried to the window.

"I am sorry to trouble you, my love," explained Lady Carfax, with her old-fashioned courtesy, "but will you kindly give Catherine a message? The Turners have just sent me a note to ask me to go up to the Rowans' to luncheon, and they will drive me in to Draycott: so I have told Reynolds that I shall not want the horses after all. Will you kindly tell Catherine this, as I am somewhat pressed for time?"

"Are you going there at once?" asked Elsie, with nervous anxiety; but Lady Carfax was too short-sighted to notice the girl's expression.

"As soon as I have finished reading the paper to Sir Henry. Will you come in and see him, my dear?" But Elsie made a lame excuse and hurried away: she would go down to the lake and hide herself until Lady Carfax was safely off the premises, and then there would be no awkward questions. "It is not right of Mrs. Romney to put me in such a painful position," she thought, with another wave of indignation: "she sacrifices every one, Oliver, and me, and her own husband, to this horrid mystery. I feel I can bear no more. I shall

ask Oliver to let me go back to Banksland." And with this resolution Elsie opened her book. Presently Emma came in search of her to tell her that luncheon was ready.

"No one seemed to know where to find you, ma'am," she explained, "but I saw you from an upper window. I think Roberts has gone to the east wing."

"And Lady Carfax has gone out?"

"Oh, yes, an hour ago: she left her love, and hoped Mrs. Romney felt brighter, and that she would eat a good luncheon."

"But you told her that Mrs. Romney was out?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, but she was in too great a hurry to hear me, for she only said, 'Give my love to her, and tell her I shall be home by six.'"

"What a piece of good luck, the Turners sending that invitation!" thought Elsie, as she sat down to her solitary meal. Roberts was very attentive to her, though he was evidently perplexed by the absence of his young mistress, and Elsie, feeling somewhat relieved, made an excellent meal.

Her spirits were beginning to rise: after all, things were not so bad as she imagined; it was nearly half-past two, and in another two hours Mrs. Romney would be at Fordham: she would reach home nearly an hour before the Squire could put in an appearance. Elsie began to feel as though enjoyment were possible. She smoothed her hair, and, fetching her embroidery, seated herself in the veranda. She had made up her mind to be at Fordham Station in time to meet the train, so that Mrs. Romney should not have a long, lonely walk.

Elsie's thoughts began to stray happily to the future, and to the Indian bungalow that awaited her: she was trying to recall what a friend of hers had told her about Indian life and its pleasures, when she heard the green door in the shrubbery shut, and a moment afterwards quick footsteps crunching the gravel.

"She has come back earlier than she expected," thought the girl, joyfully, as she sprang up from her chair. "It cannot be half-past three yet." But Elsie's bright look of expectation changed to absolute dismay as the Squire's tall figure emerged from the shrubbery.

Elsie would have turned and fled, but he had seen her, and waved his hand gayly. He had walked fast, and looked hot and tired, and he flung himself down in a hammock-seat in the cool veranda with a sigh of relief. "Upon my word, it is the hottest day we have had this year, and there has not been a yard of shade the whole way. How delightfully cool and comfortable you look!"

"Where is Oliver?" faltered Elsie, who felt anything but cool that moment.

"Oh, Spiers got hold of him and carried him off to luncheon at the Hall. He will come by the next train. I got through all my business quicker than I expected: so I thought I might as well come home. Is Catherine lying down?"

"No," rather faintly. "Oh, how tired you look! Shall Roberts bring you anything? Would you like tea earlier?"

"If he would bring me some hock and seltzer I should be deeply

grateful; no, nonsense! where are you going, Elsie? Do you think I am too far gone to ring the dining-room bell and give my orders?" But Elsie turned a deaf ear to this: she would ring for Roberts, and make her escape.

She looked at the clock as she passed it: twenty minutes to four: nearly another hour before Mrs. Romney's train was due at Fordham!

"I will not go near him," she said to herself, as she locked herself into her room. "He will think me unkind and neglectful, but it is the only course to pursue." But a few minutes later there was a knock at her door.

It was Emma, with a disturbed look on her rosy face.

"If you please, ma'am, will you go down to master, Roberts says. He wants to speak to you a moment."

"Very well, Emma," was the reply; but poor Elsie was some minutes before she could summon up her courage to face the Squire.

He was still in the veranda, and had evidently had his refreshment, but he looked decidedly put out.

"What a time you have been!" he said, a little irritably. "Why did you go away, Elsie? I wanted to talk to you. What is this Roberts tells me, that Catherine is out? Surely she and you could not have misunderstood my orders. Out in this sun! Roberts says that, to the best of his belief, she has been out most of the day." And there was an ominous frown on the Squire's face.

"It is not my fault," began Elsie, rather lamely, but he interrupted her:

"When did she leave the house?"

"I do not know,—not the exact time, I mean. I was playing with Harry down by the lake, and when I looked for her, Emma told me that she had gone out."

"And have you no idea of the time?"

"It was before eleven. I was going back to the house to tell her how cool and shady it was by the water, and I was very troubled when I could not find her."

"Did she leave no message? Good heavens, Elsie! she must surely have told some one where she was going."

"She left a note to say that she was going to Draycott by train, and would be back by the four-thirty train."

An alarmed look came into the Squire's face. "Do you mean to tell me that she walked to Fordham Station?"

"Oh, yes, she walked," returned Elsie, wishing with all her heart that she were anywhere else. "She thought Lady Carfax wanted the horses, but the Turners are driving her in to Draycott. I know she means to walk back."

"We shall see about that," returned Mr. Carfax, abruptly, and he rang the drawing-room bell with a peal that brought Roberts without delay.

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CHAPTER XVII.

ROMNEY.

I will instruct my sorrow to be proud.
King John.

"TELL Reynolds to put the mare into the victoria and to meet the four-thirty train at Fordham."

"It is ten minutes past four now, sir," replied Roberts, respectfully; "by the stable clock it is near the quarter."

"Tell him to drive fast and overtake me," was the curt answer: "he is to look sharp about it, mind." And the Squire took up his straw hat.

"Let me go with you," pleaded Elsie, terrified at the sternness of his manner: in spite of his easy good nature, the Squire was never disobeyed with impunity.

"I must go with you," she continued, as he shook his head: "I see you are angry with us both, and I must explain things. Poor Mrs. Romney! oh, I know she cannot help herself."

"Get your hat, then," was his curt reply. Romney was not quite pleased with Elsie: he fancied that her answer had been evasive, and if there was one thing that the Squire detested with all his honest heart, it was want of straightforwardness: if she were free from blame, why had she left him, and why did she seem so nervous when he questioned her about Catherine's movements? There was something beneath all this, and he meant to get to the bottom of it.

And Catherine, his own Kitty, had disobeyed him! Too well he remembered all those tender injunctions of his, how he had begged her as a favor to him not to exert herself in any way, and she had smiled in his face as she answered him. "You foolish, tiresome old man," she had called him.

Not exert herself; and she had walked in this sun, not an inch of shade anywhere, and had spent the whole day at Draycott! "It is enough to try a saint's patience," he thought, angrily. No wonder Elsie looked at him with wide, frightened eyes as they walked down the shrubbery path together; but he kept silence until they were in the road.

"Well," he observed, abruptly, as he tried to adapt his long strides to his companion's tripping steps,—"well, Elsie, what is this that you have to tell me?"

"I want to tell you why Mrs. Romney is so ill," she replied, in a breathless voice. "I have only just found it out for myself. It is because she is keeping something from you, and it makes her dreadfully unhappy. You and Dr. Fergusson think she is ill; but no, it is only fretting because she feels she is deceiving you."

"Do you know what you are saying?" returned Romney; and then he actually laughed. "Catherine deceive me! Why, the idea is utterly absurd!"

"She could not help herself. That is why I am telling you, because it is no use her trying to hide it any longer. She has bound Oliver to secrecy, but she has not bound me, and I have never told a

lie in my life, and I never will; and I want to help her, because she is so good and I love her."

"Bound Oliver to secrecy?" Romney began to feel a little giddy. What did the girl mean? why did she not speak out? Of course his Kitty was good, every one knew that, but all the same she had disobeyed him to-day.

"When you know all about it, you will not blame her in the least," went on Elsie, in the same breathless way. "You will be far too sorry for her. No one can help loving one's own father, especially when he is old and dying and broken-hearted." But here Romney laid a strong hand on the girl's slight shoulder.

"She has gone to see her father? What do you mean by this prevarication, Elsie? Just now when we were in the house you told me that Catherine had gone to Draycott."

"It is no prevarication," returned Elsie, indignantly. "You will make me angry with you if you say that. Mr. Vincent is at Draycott; he is hiding there from his wicked wife; and Eva is with him; and he is dying, and his poor brain is confused, and that is why Mrs. Romney has gone to him."

The Squire's hand dropped from her shoulder.

"Tell me all you know about this business," he said, sternly. "I was wrong in accusing you of prevarication. You are a good little soul, Elsie; but I think I am stupid with all this heat, for I do not seem to follow you. Mr. Vincent is at Draycott, you say, and the child Eva, and Catherine is with them, and Oliver, not her husband, is in her confidence?"

"Oh, I will explain that." And to the best of her ability Elsie did explain it, but it may be doubted how much the Squire understood.

The shock that staggered him was that Catherine had deceived him, that she had not ventured to trust her husband; for weeks, for months, she had kept this secret from him, from him who had never concealed a thought from her; she had deceived him for his own good, of course, but still she had deceived him.

"And Oliver was in her confidence!" He repeated this aloud, to Elsie's dismay.

"It was not Oliver's fault. Mr. Carfax, you do not understand: it has made Oliver so wretched; he hated the whole thing; he kept begging her to tell you everything, but she was afraid."

"Oh, she was afraid!" And the Squire laughed again, only it was not a pleasant laugh to hear. He began to think that he was dreaming, that Elsie must be talking to some one else. Kitty afraid of him! what a droll idea! untrue, too, on the face of it.

"There is Mrs. Romney coming towards us," exclaimed Elsie, suddenly. "Oh, how wan and ill she looks! Dear Mr. Carfax, do be good to her." But Romney turned impatiently from her: would the girl never cease her chattering? And yet Elsie had done her poor little best, and bravely too: with her ready girlish fingers she had cut the Gordian knot. "What was the use of deceiving him any more?" she said to Oliver afterwards. "It was the safest plan to tell him everything: only I made such a muddle of it."

The Squire stopped short when he saw his wife, but Catherine did not at first perceive them: she was walking in rather an unsteady way, her dress trailing in the dust behind her, and a dazed, far-off look in her eyes. She would have passed them in that strange abstraction, but Romney's voice arrested her: "Catherine." Never had he said that beloved name in such a tone.

She started violently, and the blood ebbed away from her face, with the sudden surprise.

"I did not see you. Have you come to meet me, you and Elsie?" Then, as she saw his face more clearly, "Oh, Romney, do not be angry with me! I know I have disobeyed you, but indeed, indeed——"

"I have told him everything," whispered Elsie. "It was the only thing to do."

"Yes, I know everything," replied her husband, with forced calm. "There is the victoria coming: we may as well go back and meet it." And he was turning away; but Catherine caught him by the arm.

"No, not everything, Romney," in a voice that was agonized and yet triumphant. "He is at rest; my poor father is at rest; he will never know sorrow and pain again. Listen to me, dear: by and by I will ask you to forgive me for my cowardice and deceit, but this moment I can only think of him. He died in my arms an hour ago; died?—nay, he slept away like a little child, and I kissed his dear eyes, and thanked God. Romney!" in a voice of despair,—"oh, he is not listening to me, and I am tired, so tired!" And, to Elsie's alarm, she swayed forward, and Romney caught her in his arms.

Poor Catherine! that dark irresponsive look on Romney's face was the last drop in her cup of sorrow. Worn out by heat, fatigue, her own weakness, and the tension of the last few hours, nothing could be more natural than that long fainting-fit, which alarmed Elsie nearly out of her senses and drove Romney to desperation.

He lifted her into the carriage, and supported her himself, and the moment they reached the house Reynolds was sent off to fetch Dr. Fergusson. Consciousness soon returned, however, and in a little while she was able to thank Elsie for her kindly attentions.

"Where is Romney?" she whispered, faintly, as Elsie kissed her and hoped she was better.

"He has shut himself up in the library, and Dr. Fergusson is to go to him there, and he has asked for Oliver. He only left the room just now: he waited until he heard you speak." But this evidently failed to give Catherine any comfort, for she closed her eyes with a deep sigh.

"He cannot trust himself to speak to me," she thought, and the slow tears of utter weakness rolled down her face. "He is angry with me, or he would not have left me."

Elsie read her thoughts. "He has only just left the room," she said, soothingly. "I dare say he will be back directly. He was dreadfully anxious: he would not let any one but himself carry you up-stairs, and he looked so white and frightened that I felt quite sorry for him." But Catherine made no reply to this: some old refrain was ringing in her ears with dizzy persistence, "And to be wroth with one

we love,"—how did it go on?—"to be wroth," "to be wroth," beat like tiny hammers in her brain, but it was some time before the next line occurred to her.

"Oh, I have got it!" she said presently, to Elsie's alarm, for she thought Mrs. Romney was delirious: "and to be wroth with one we love doth work like madness on the brain: but my Romney, God bless him, is not mad."

When Dr. Fergusson had paid his visit, he went down to the library with rather a grave face. Oliver had just come in, and was talking to his brother. Romney listened gloomily to the doctor's opinion.

"A medical man has sharp eyes," Dr. Fergusson said, presently. "Mrs. Carfax is evidently suffering from some painful shock. I told you yesterday that her nerves were overstrained, and now I must repeat my orders, perfect quiet and no agitated discussion: body and mind must have entire rest, or I will not answer for the consequences. The quieter you keep her the better."

"You heard what Fergusson said," observed Romney, dryly, when the doctor left them. "If Catherine escapes a nervous illness I shall be much surprised." "What is the use of your telling me to go up to her?" he continued, irritably, when some further conversation had passed between them: "it will only excite Catherine and do no good."

"My dear fellow, if you could bring yourself to say a kind word to her, it would do all the good in the world. I have explained the whole thing to you. Even if Catherine has deceived you, as you say, surely she has been sufficiently punished. You must remember that those poor things put themselves under her protection. It was not Catherine's fault that her father came to Draycott."

"I know all about that," returned the Squire, sharply. "Elsie told me. Do you imagine that I blame Catherine for sheltering her own father, and when the old man was dying, too? Do you think I am made of adamant? Good heavens, if she had only trusted me, if she had come to me and said, 'Romney, my father and Eva are at Draycott, and I want you to help me to take care of them,' why, I would have helped with all my heart."

"I know that as well as you do, old man."

"And yet my wife misunderstands me. Look here, Oliver, I am an easy-going sort of fellow, as long as people take me the right way, but I have an obstinate temper when I am roused. It is Catherine's want of trust that cuts me to the heart. I did not think she had a thought hidden from me, and all these months she has practised this deception. Somehow I feel as though I were dreaming," continued the Squire, drawing his hand across his eyes: "it cannot possibly be Kitty who is afraid of her husband."

Lady Carfax wondered what was amiss when she saw her son's gloomy face at the dinner-table. The account of Catherine's fainting-attack had reached her on her return home, and she had gone up at once to her daughter-in-law's room to pet and condole with her.

"She looks flushed and weak, and her eyes are far too bright," she observed, but, to her surprise, Romney made no response: he was

evidently in a bad humor, a very rare occurrence with the Squire; but Lady Carfax with much tact held her peace, and resolved to question Oliver afterwards, but directly after dinner Catherine sent for him.

She was lying on her couch by the open window, and looked ill and depressed.

"Is he very angry with me, Oliver?" she asked, as he sat down by her.

"He is more hurt than angry. Oh, Catherine, if you had only taken my advice and trusted him, all this trouble would have been averted. There is not a more generous fellow living than Romney."

"Do you think I do not know that,—I who adore him?" in a voice of strong emotion. "Oh, how miserably weak I have been! And yet—and yet—if it were all to come over again, I should do the same."

"I am sorry to hear you say that." And Oliver's tone was somewhat repressive.

"Why should I not say it, if it be true? I was a coward on my father's account, and as long as he lived I should have acted like one. Oliver, what is to become of Eva? I cannot bear to leave her in that house, she is such a nervous little creature."

"Romney has arranged for her to come here: Elsie and I are to fetch her to-morrow." Then Catherine burst into passionate tears.

"Oh, how good he is, Oliver! Do beg him to come to me. I cannot rest until I ask his forgiveness. I will humble myself to him, and he shall say what he likes to me, if he will only forgive me in the end."

"Oh, he will forgive you right enough," returned Oliver, with assumed cheerfulness, "but if I were you I would leave all these explanations until to-morrow. Romney is a bit down to-night: you must give him time." But Catherine interrupted him:

"Do you mean that he will not come near me,—that no message, however urgent, will bring him to me?"

"Oh, that is putting it too strongly," returned Oliver, kindly. "You are too emotional, Catherine. There is no use working yourself into a fever. Look at it like a sensible woman: you have offended your husband by your want of confidence, and he feels himself badly used; he is not inclined to make it up to-night, but to-morrow he will be more like himself. Now, what is the most sensible line of conduct to pursue? Why, to send him a nice affectionate message by me, and then go to bed and take your sleeping-draught. Don't you agree with me, Catherine?"

"No," she replied, and a strange look came into her beautiful eyes, "no, I do not agree with you; but you mean well, Oliver, and you have been very kind to me, my dear brother. Now go down-stairs to Elsie, for I cannot talk any more, and wish Gran good-night for me."

"And you will go to bed?"

"Oh, yes, I shall go to bed," in a dreary voice, "but I am not ready just yet." But as she put out her hand to dismiss him he felt it was burning.

"She looks on the brink of a nervous attack," thought Oliver, as he went down-stairs, "but it is no use trying to turn Romney from his purpose, and he absolutely refused to go near her: if he would only give her a good blowing up and settle it that way, it would be far better for Catherine; she is such an impetuous creature, she will never give him time to come round of his own accord."

No, indeed: Oliver was perfectly right there. Even as he closed the drawing-room door behind him, Catherine was standing by her couch smoothing her dark hair with nervous fingers, and a minute later she crept with soft cautious steps to the library. The lamp was unlighted, but the clear moonlight shone full on Romney's face as he sat in his high-backed chair by the window; his pipe was still unlighted, and there was something forlorn and unrestful in his attitude that touched the wife's heart very keenly.

The next moment her arms were round his neck and she was leaning over him.

"You would not come to me,—Oliver told me so. You were quite right, love; it was for me to come to you. Do you think I could sleep until I asked you to forgive me?"

"Catherine, what madness is this?" he said, hastily. "Do you want to drive me crazy with your inconsiderate conduct? Do you know you are ill, that Dr. Fergusson says that you are to be kept perfectly quiet, that you are on no account to leave your room? and yet you are guilty of this folly."

"I am guilty of no folly in asking my husband's forgiveness," she said, sadly, for this repulse frightened her. "If I were dying, I would try and reach you somehow. Oh, Romney, let me stay with you a moment! let me speak to you!" for he had taken her up in his arms and was carrying her swiftly to the door.

"Not one word," he said, between his teeth. "I will not be disobeyed like this. I told Oliver there should be no talk to-night: to-morrow I will tell you what I think: if you wish me to forgive you, you will respect my wishes to-night."

"Very well," she said, faintly, and he laid her down carefully on her couch. She averted her face with a sob. He stood beside her a moment, hesitated, and then stooped down and kissed her forehead.

"Try to sleep," he said, in a gentler voice. "I shall be sitting up late, and I shall not disturb you." And then he left the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A HARD LESSON.

> Hang there like fruit, my soul,
> Till the tree dies.
>
> *Cymbeline.*

"TRY to sleep." Only a man could have said that.

Sleep, when every pulse was beating and every nerve quivering! when the shooting pain in her temples amounted to positive agony! when thought was confused and yet active, and still the tiny hammers

in her brain beat incessantly to the refrain "and to be wroth with one we love"—but again the last line failed her.

Mind and body were alike worn out by the strange tension of the last few weeks, and in her weakness and despondency Catherine was no longer able to discriminate or judge with any degree of calmness. For the moment she seemed utterly forsaken and desolate: Romney had put her away from him; he refused to listen to her explanation; the weight of his anger had crushed her, and in her morbid self-abandonment she fancied that he had ceased to love her.

"I have disappointed him," she thought; "he will never think the same of me again: to-morrow he will forgive me, at least he will bring himself to tell me so, but he will never trust his Kitty again."

All her life long Catherine never looked back on that hour without shuddering: her disordered fancies made even the clear white moonlight a terror to her; she felt as though she were possessed by some nightmare; she had no strength to leave her couch; a numbness seemed creeping over her; the cold pitiless light weighed down her heavy eyelids; she shivered and longed for darkness.

A timid knock at the door failed to arouse her: it was repeated, and then a little white figure glided between her and the moonlight, and the comforting touch of cool human hands was laid on her burning temples.

"Is that you, Elsie?"

"Yes, dear. I have come to wish you good-night. Why are you lying here? Do you know how late it is? eleven; and you have not begun to undress."

"I have no strength to move," she returned, faintly. "I have tried to rise, and I cannot. Elsie, I think my heart is broken. If Romney changes to me I cannot live."

A footstep that had followed Elsie down the corridor paused outside the half-open door. Catherine's weak tones reached the unseen auditor.

"You must be dreaming, my poor dear," returned Elsie, in a compassionate voice. "Do you know what you are saying? It is absurd: you will think so yourself to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" in the same strange stifled voice; "but there is the night to come first. Elsie, listen to me: I feel I must talk. Do you know, I went down to Romney just now,—was it just now, or hours ago?—I wanted to kneel by him and to ask his pardon as though I were a little child. 'If I did wrong it was for my father's sake; but I will never hide a thought from you again,—never,—never!' that is what I would have said to him; but at my first word he silenced me."

"Oh, no! impossible!"

"Ah, but he did! he told me that I was ill, and that I ought not to have left my room. I was too weak to argue with him; but when he carried me back and told me to try and sleep, I could have laughed aloud in my agony. Sleep! with this sickness at my heart!"

"I will go down to the Squire: he has no right to be so hard to you. Let me go, dear Mrs. Romney." But Catherine held her fast.

"No, you shall not go: he has every right to be hard with me, and I will bear my punishment meekly. Do you know that he has

never before spoken an angry word to me,—never, since I have been his wife, his most happy wife? To-morrow he will tell me that I have grieved him to the heart, that my want of trust has been a sin and shame, and I shall not answer him a word: he shall say what he will to me, and I shall only love him more."

"He will certainly forgive you: he knows now all that you have suffered for your father's sake."

"Yes, he knows it all now. Elsie, do you know that my poor father blessed me? he called me 'his good faithful daughter,' and bade God bless me, over and over again."

"And you were with him when he died?"

"Yes: I held him in my arms. Just at the last he wandered, and did not know us, but his words were very sweet. 'Where the wicked cease from troubling,'—we heard him murmur that,—'and where the weary are at rest.' Do you think Romney will let me put those words over his tomb?" But as Elsie was about to answer her, a dark figure stood in the door-way.

"I am here, Catherine.—Elsie, thank you for taking care of her." And as Elsie rose, Romney took her place.

When the door closed behind the girl he knelt down beside his wife's couch. "The door was open, and I heard my name," he whispered. "Darling, I was too hard to you; but we must forgive each other." And as Catherine's weak arms drew his face down to hers his reconciling kiss spoke more than words.

"I do not deserve to be so happy," were Catherine's last words that night when she had ended her child-like confession and Romney had again and again assured her of his forgiveness. "Dear, it has been a hard lesson; but if you will trust your Kitty again she will never disappoint you."

"That is well," he returned, with his old kindly smile. "But now you are utterly exhausted: go to sleep, like a good child." And Catherine obediently closed her eyes.

After all, Catherine paid dearly for her lesson. Not even her husband's generous forgiveness or the consciousness of his undiminished love could avert the threatened mischief. When morning came, Catherine could not rise from her bed: a low nervous fever had laid hold of her, and as Romney listened to her confused wanderings as she lived through those miserable hours again, his honest heart was full of pity and remorse.

Catherine believed herself still under the cloud of her husband's displeasure, and would entreat his forgiveness over and over again. "If you love me less I shall die," she would say to him. "I will not live without your love."

When she grew better, it was touching to see her utter weakness and dependence on him. "I thought I was going to die," she said to him once, "but God has been very good to us. When I get well I mean to be a better wife to you: you shall never again have cause to complain of me."

"The old Kitty is good enough for me," he would say, wistfully, for the look of pain in her eyes saddened him: it was a new thing to

hear Catherine accusing herself; he longed with a longing that surprised himself to hear her frank laugh again and the droll merry speeches that had gladdened his daily life.

This gentle saddened Catherine was a new development; but his mother comforted him.

"Catherine is too weak to throw off her sad thoughts," she said, very sensibly. "You must take her away: you know Dr. Fergusson recommended a thorough change. Elsie has offered to take Eva back with her to Banksland and will keep her willingly until her marriage. Why not take Catherine abroad? Harry will be quite safe with me." And, after some demur, Romney acted on this advice. The plan answered well, and Catherine soon recovered tone and spirits among snow mountains and Swiss valleys, and her sensitive nature gathered new strength. Romney always called it their second honey-moon; and though he sometimes remarked that his old Kitty had never come back, one thing was certain, that he never loved his wife so well as he did now when he saw returning health and peace stamped on her sweet face and knew in his heart of hearts that the new Kitty was a dearer and a wiser woman.

THE END.